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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

W. H. AUDEN AND THE DRAMA

by

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled W. H. Auden and the Drama, submitted by Trevor McNeely in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



## ABSTRACT

The early career of W. H. Auden includes an eight year period (1929-1937) when one of his principal interests was the writing of drama; he is author or co-author of five plays. The dramatic background to this period largely explains both Auden's interest in drama and the dramatic techniques his plays employ. Basic influences are those of Brecht and the expressionists. In analyzing Auden's plays, it is observed that while plot mechanics, stage techniques, and even styles change considerably from play to play, the central preoccupation of the playwright and the underlying themes of his plays remain essentially the same throughout. Taken as a group the plays constitute an extended study and diagnosis of the condition of collective western man, with two areas of this condition receiving consistent emphasis: his politics and his psychology. The concern with politics particularly is a part of the milieu of the day but the concern with psychology (which turns out really to be Auden's central interest) is his own peculiar interpretation of the ideas of Freud. Technically, the movement in these plays is toward a more conventional dramatic style in the later plays, a style in which, generally speaking, Auden is less successful.



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## INTRODUCTION

An important part of the canon of the poet W. H. Auden comprises works essentially dramatic in conception. Auden's first commercially published effort was in fact a drama, and writing expressly for the stage occupied him principally for several years in the early stages of his career. He wrote, or collaborated in the writing of, five plays which saw presentation. On his first two efforts Auden went alone. These were short plays: Paid on Both Sides, a "charade" as Auden significantly called it, and The Dance of Death. They were succeeded by three more ambitious full-length plays: The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F6, and On the Frontier, and these three plays were done in collaboration with his long-time friend Christopher Isherwood.

Broadly, the intention of this thesis is to explore in detail Auden's use of the dramatic form. I intend to consider the plays in every significant aspect, including such elements as the theatrical and dramatic techniques employed (the borrowed, the original, and the altered), and a complete analysis of ideas and themes.

The thesis begins with a discussion of the twentieth-century theatrical tradition to which the plays of Auden and Isherwood belong. It is not to deny the great measure of originality in the conception of these plays to point out that they make extensive use of borrowed ideas as well. To treat this important aspect of our interpretative problem at the beginning seems, for at least two reasons, the best approach. To do justice to the subject at all, firstly, the recalling of this age not so





long ago when hope for the stage was great indeed, is one of our primary tasks. In the aftermath of the great war, a demoralized continent in desperate need of a new dedication gave rise to and embraced a dynamic theatre whose radical aims and daring departures from the stultified past bespoke a stirring and important vitality. Experimentalism was the keynote and enthusiasm was the norm among those involved in the theatrical movement of the period. It is a strange milieu: enthusiasm and confusion, despair and faith combined; in another age Auden may never have been a playwright. My subject thus can hardly be presented without first setting its tone by picturing the dramatic revolution that lies behind it. And not only are these general necessities of context and background served by giving first position in the discussion to the tradition in which Auden and Isherwood are writing, but the various particular debts of form, technique or ideas their plays owe to other originals can be paid here as well, another necessary preliminary to exploring the plays themselves.

Auden's two short dramas, taken up in Chapter II, are treated separately because they display qualities that seem to warrant a separate discussion. They are less ambitious efforts, more uncertain both in design and execution than the full-length plays they preceded. Embryonic, undeveloped ideas and possibilities that found expression and bore fruit later in the cycle often appear here. These plays are, as they are considered here, clearly in every sense preliminary to, and preparatory for, the major efforts that followed.

The long Chapter III comprises the heart of the thesis, the detailed study of the three long plays for which Chapters I and II have been



preparatory. The attempt is to elucidate and evaluate, analyzing what has been attempted and what has been achieved. A short conclusion then follows, to sum up the thesis as a whole.



# I

## THE DRAMATIC BACKGROUND

The expression "dramatic revolution" was employed in the preface as a general characterization for the series of experiments and movements to which the European stage was subject in the period after World War I. The seeds of the revolution had been sown earlier, but the dynamic period when opposition to Ibsenite stage realism was at its height, and during which it seemed for a moment that some of the new experimental modes might prevail, occurred in this epoch of disillusion and upheaval. It would be impossible in a discussion here, and it is fortunately unnecessary as well, to embrace all of the radical ideas and brilliant intentions that found dubiously successful stage expression under the banner of revolution in this post-war period. The path that leads to Auden, mercifully, is not a devious one. It follows what is perhaps the mainstream in the twentieth-century tradition of experimentalism in all the arts, from poetry to music, and is dominated by the figures and movements that made this tradition.

It was around 1890 that the spirit of revolution first began to make a stir in all the arts. The movement was in no way a coordinated or coherent one, but rather arose seemingly spontaneously in the works of various artists in various media around the same time. And we cannot really talk satisfactorily about the nature of the movement and assess its causes without looking first at the state of the arts in the period preceding it, since the new mode was in its beginnings a reactionary one. And in proceeding into this area, my apology will perhaps be accepted





for the inevitable oversimplifications I will be obliged, by the necessity of brevity in this part of the discussion, to employ. This tradition itself, which we may temporarily christen simply "Realism," had been itself a profoundly revolutionary movement scarcely twenty years earlier, and it is really at the roots of Realism that our story properly begins.

Art, in the declining Europe of Victoria and the Second Empire, has a cliché image, perhaps in broad terms accurate, of an art that had lost contact with reality. The peaceful landscapes of Millet, the benevolent philosophy and drawing-room elegancies of "Tennysonian" verse, and the emasculate resources of romantic melodrama on which the stage depended contrast sharply with the brutal fact of men and social systems in a state of turmoil. Reaction to the drift of art away from reality begins in the eighteen-sixties with writers like Dostoevski and Ibsen. What can be conveyed in a paragraph of the monumental contribution made by these two figures and a very few others to everything in art and philosophy that has succeeded them? The new tendency they began was not only toward a more realistic approach to art, but along with this, and of much greater significance, a depth of penetration into the soul of man and man's universe with hitherto undreamed-of implications. To the single potent symbol of Dostoevski's driven, morbid Underground Man, revealer of the hidden appalling impulse Thomas Mann called man's "dark underside," the debt of modern art as well as modern understanding is incalculable. It is a debt as clearly manifested now in the tortured landscapes of Van Gogh as in the haunted heroes of William Faulkner's novels. And Ibsen too, building independently, but delving with equal precision into the heart of confused and alienated man, delivered further similar impetus to Dostoevski's. Granting of course, as we must, that great art has always





had psychological and philosophic profundity, it is nonetheless true that the overwhelming preoccupation of artists (and of their critical coterie, perhaps especially) with dichotomies of light and dark, reason and unreason, in the soul of man and in the universe is preeminently a modern phenomenon. It is a phenomenon too of which awareness among artists has steadily grown as, to the accompaniment of the twentieth century's cataclysms of war and revolution, its terrifying meaning has penetrated the consciousness of collective humanity. And it is the new emphasis on depth that is the unique legacy of prototypical artists like Dostoevski and Ibsen.

It might seem that I am stressing unduly a movement that, as I have already said, preceded the new modes in art that are our proper concern, but such a conclusion is premature. For the key element making the new art possible was, as we shall see, the same consciousness of deep perception and of implications far beyond mere surfaces that was the basis of Realism as well. It is no more than the truth to say that without the insight provided by Dostoevski and Ibsen, little in the literature of the last century could have transpired as it has done. The theatrical style pioneered by Ibsen that became known, and later crystallized, as dramatic Realism, was but one formula, or set of formulae for attempting to convey deeper insights. Symbolism, surrealism, and expressionism were others. Ibsen himself never became static in his approach to his art, but continued his innovations of ideas and techniques throughout his career: in his last plays he himself was as far beyond the style of his own middle period as the most radical symbolist.

The basic differences, then, between dramatic Realism and its experimental successors, are differences of technique rather than of



principle. And, technique being the criterion on which the split is really founded, we might consider briefly here exactly what Realism's "technique" is. I can be very brief here precisely because the basic features of realistic style are so familiar and ubiquitous in modern drama that rehearsal of them is nearly superfluous. Ibsen's realistic plays begin with A Doll's House, a play whose social implications were its main function. In it, the more effectively to convey these implications, Ibsen conceived his characters and settings to duplicate as accurately as possible a typical social milieu in the eighteen-seventies. The medium of expression is the natural one, the prose of everyday. Everything in the play is oriented to this stylistic principle: the stage becomes a room, its props real furnishings. The whole convention of dramatic realism is nothing more or less than this. And the point that must be emphasized, an obvious one and yet so easily overlooked, is that A Doll's House is a classic play in spite of, rather than because of the realistic convention. As with all of Ibsen's social dramas, the greatness of A Doll's House is its evocation and embodiment of inner life: the very heartbeats of the characters and their society pulse through it. And clearly the triumph involved is essentially one of dramatic genius over the severe limitations to dramatic expression that the convention of rigid realism imposes. After Ibsen, it was left to writers of lesser genius, perhaps principally Emile Zola, to draft the creed of "naturalism," as they called it--putting a quasi-scientific emphasis on man as a creation of his environment--and a rigid theatrical school was born.

With the vital and profound social realism of Ibsen as the spark and centre of the movement, the rise of naturalism as the only effective





force in the drama of the period was, throughout the eighteen-eighties very rapid. Avant garde theatres sprang up in various localities: Paris, Berlin and later Moscow--disseminating the gospel of naturalism.

With naturalism scarcely established, however, dissatisfaction among artists chafing under its restrictions planted the seeds of a counter-revolution. With disturbing accuracy, Ibsen's and Dostoevski's work had thrown light and emphasis on the existence of forces of fundamental significance, within man and yet beyond his control, whose implications brought clearly into question every set of universal values heretofore accepted as permanent. The problem of how best to render artistic justice to discoveries so momentous was by no means amenable to any fast, ready-made solution. A dogmatic naturalism ready, even eager as it seemed, to explore the most sordid aspects of social degeneracy, was only one possible approach. It had not satisfied Ibsen, and could not satisfy many others. The weak spot in naturalism was, of course, its overemphasis on photographic fidelity to the externals of real life, which tended to ignore perhaps the one essential element in the new process of understanding--inner man. It was in rendering inner man and inner reality that the real challenge to artists lay.

And so, groping and fumbling, began the revolutionary attempts of artists to find and utilize new ways of artistic expression, the process that as a collective phenomenon in all the arts Ortega y Gasset called "dehumanization."<sup>1</sup> I bring in Ortega y Gasset "cold," as it were, here, because in his interesting essay examining the phenomena--sociological as well as psychological--associated with post-realistic art, he calls attention to various simple principles of the new art that seem to me to



go to the very heart of what the whole experimental movement was.

"Dehumanization" is Ortega y Gasset's word for what was the common and basic tendency in all of the experimental modes: a reorientation of art away from the imitation or reproduction of anything that ordinary human perceptions would recognize as real. Thus, the affinity of the tendency with the "art for art's sake" movement can be easily seen: where the repudiation of representation in art means effective and voluntary alienation of the mass audience. Equally obvious of course is the absolute opposition of the new movement to its predecessor naturalism/realism; it is a movement, in fact, in precisely the opposite direction. One of the basic laws of "high" naturalism for instance, is that the intrusion of the medium--book or stage--between the spectator and the work is to be reduced to the absolute minimum; the main object is to make the illusion of reality as effective as artistically possible. The new art, on the contrary, goes to the opposite extreme, exalting the medium and recognizing it as possessing its own distinct reality, with creative potential as vast as the continents of pure imagination. Starting from the same real object, dehumanized art proceeds in the opposite direction from reproducing its every face, its every shade, its every angle:

The question is not to paint something altogether different from a man, a house, a mountain, but to paint a man who resembles a man as little as possible; a house that preserves of a house exactly what is needed to reveal the metamorphosis; a cone miraculously emerging--as the snake from his slough--from what used to be a mountain. (Ortega y Gasset, 23)

Though this statement refers specifically to the painter's art, the parallel implications in the dehumanizing movement for the drama as well can be neatly illustrated by it. For, clearly, what the specific object of the mountain becomes, approached in this way, is the type of a mountain,







and what it attempts to express is the essence of all mountains.

The highly influential "symbolist" drama of Maeterlinck was one of the earliest attempts at dehumanizing the art of the stage, foreshadowing in various ways many of the later movements. Maeterlinck, significantly, was, among other things, a discerning critic of Ibsen, able to distinguish, as few of his contemporaries did, the less superficial factors in Ibsen's genius. He named Ibsen one of the "two Poets [who] have succeeded in escaping from the world of obvious actuality, without returning to that of the chimeras of old,"<sup>2</sup> and of his plays said:

When . . . Ibsen tries to combine with other mysteries the acts of his men who are prey to an abnormal conscience, of his women who are a prey to hallucination, we must admit that if the atmosphere he creates is strange and troubling, it is healthy and breathable because it is rarely reasonable and real. (Clark, 415)

Maeterlinck felt the impact of a revolution in thought over the previous three-quarters century, and saw clearly the need for changed artistic modes adapted to it; though his ideas of precisely what the nature of the new art should be were, perhaps understandably, vague:

. . . the dramatist of the present has arrived upon the scene at a time when he cannot sincerely accept the ancient truths, and when the new truths, which are to replace the old, are not yet determined, have even no name, he hesitates, feels his way and, . . . dares not risk going beyond the immediate reality. (415)

Before proceeding further, I should perhaps draw attention to one important characteristic and motivating force behind all the new movements in art not so far mentioned. It is a feature indeed obvious enough, but one which under no circumstances should be overlooked. We have noted it in naturalistic theory; it is especially prominent in the comprehensive creed of Zola: a calculated and emphatic linking of dramatic theory to current scientific theories of evolution and environ-



mental influences. Behind Maeterlinckean symbolism lay the same impetus. For Maeterlinck the ultimate was mystery, but it was the probing of science into ultimates, and seemingly hovering on the brink of final answers, that forced art to take cognizance and try to deal in its own way with these mysteries of which science was making society daily more aware. Perhaps the high point in the flirtation of artists with science as they conceived it was reached when Freud's theories of unconscious psychology appeared to provide the perfect scientific correlative for the sometimes weird products of the expressionists and surrealists. I stress the connection of modern art with science here because it is of particular importance in the context of this thesis; for as we shall see, of all the thinkers of the last century none has exerted a greater or more pervasive influence over Auden's thought than Freud. And it is largely because of Freudian psychology's link with expressionism that I made the statement in the preface that in another age than this Auden might not have been a dramatist.

But to return to Maeterlinck and the symbolist attempt at breaking the boundaries of realism: Maeterlinck, as we have seen, recognized the depth of meaning in Ibsen's plays, his ability to arouse in the spectator awareness of "superior powers which all of us feel weighing down upon our lives,"<sup>3</sup> Mystery, destiny (he could not put into words what his awareness was), but he felt that if drama was to have significance for the modern age it must emphasize these mysterious vital influences. The ideal, even in drama, was the Joycean stasis, a turning away from external reality and individual experience, replacing them by "a shadow, a reflection, a projection of symbolic forms"<sup>4</sup>--a dehumanization in other words. Thus,





Maeterlinck's most successful plays in the symbolist style show individual character subordinated almost to nothing: characters are given generic names like "the daughter," "the grandfather," and are consciously made to speak monotonously and mechanically. In his dehumanizing emphasis Maeterlinck went so far as to suggest the use of marionettes rather than human actors for a trilogy he wrote.

Static drama, of course, as Maeterlinck later realized, was doomed to die of its own inertia, and the symbolist ideal could not be maintained. But the significant feature of the experiment was in its being the first dramatic attempt, however hesitating and unsatisfactory, at giving direct expression to things like intuitions and feelings, entities intangible in nature. And in this one characteristic Maeterlinck foreshadowed virtually everything that was to be really new in the much more radical theatre which followed him.

It was a much greater dramatist than Maeterlinck who successfully completed the metamorphosis in drama, breaking down with the force of genius all the barriers of convention in order to express the unexpressible--August Strindberg. Strindberg's greatest early works, notably The Father and Miss Julie, rank among the highest achievements of the naturalistic stage, and for Strindberg not even the French idea of naturalism was rigid or bold enough. In Miss Julie, for example, he abandoned the division into acts for the sake of maintaining the naturalistic illusion, and dreamed in his preface of the day when the stage could be more literally a room, with furniture set out on the stage front backed up to the audience. As with Ibsen, the power of Strindberg's naturalism is its "underground" quality, to use John Gassner's term,



waking the ominous awareness in the spectator of significances universal in scope and shattering in implication. In the tortured protagonist of The Father we get an essential realization of the Dostoevskian Underground Man, whose every effort, rational or rebellious, at freeing his soul from the social, familial, and intellectual shackles by which it is bound, leads only one way--downward. And it is an expressionistic flourish, prophetic of Strindberg's own later development, with which the play's title carries the clear implication of the "Father's" typicalness of all fathers. Ibsen's equal in the depth of his psychological and social insight, who recognized with deference Dostoevski as the Dante of the modern age, it was scarcely surprising that this master of dramatic method would go beyond anything previously attempted in drama, to make stage material with unflinching courage of whatever matter--hideous or sublime--his inspiration set before him.

Even in his early plays, as we have noted of The Father, Strindberg's clearly intentional imputation of a quality of universality for the situations he portrays, gave indication not only of the scope of his dramatic vision, but of the direction in which he might be moved to extend it. And in the canon of Strindberg's works is exemplified precisely the principle I have been maintaining, of the birth of dramatic expressionism as a natural outgrowth of the kind of realism both Stringberg and Ibsen brought to the stage. Ultimate reality, the essential spiritual truth and meaning--of life, if one wishes--which Maeterlinck and the symbolists groped toward giving utterance (and which, as I have been emphasizing, makes the real foundation of both Strindberg's and Ibsen's realistic theatre) Stringberg, with instinctive understanding





of its nature, came boldly to grips with in his dream plays To Damascus, A Dream Play, and The Ghost Sonata. They mark the first and still the purest achievement in the mode that became known as dramatic expressionism.

Expressionism is in one sense very easy to define: it is the exact antithesis of naturalism. If naturalism's ideal is the photographic reproduction of surfaces, expressionism goes to the other extreme, that of pure inwardness or essential being. But in another sense expressionism is plainly impossible to define, for no one can question that essential reality is, if nothing else, intrinsically beyond words. A theory of scientific psychology that recognized dreams as containing perhaps the most important key to the inner life of man was not formulated until Freud achieved it ten years after Strindberg, but, with his obsessed nature and his genius, from Strindberg's relentless probing of his own soul life retained few secrets.

Before moving on to discuss briefly Strindberg's A Dream Play as an example of expressionism in drama, we might consider for a moment some of the problems art faces when it attempts to embrace the idea of expressionism, and the criteria on which their solution is based. It is first of all clear that by the nature of pure expressionism as I defined it, anything that calls itself an expressionist play or painting is a form of compromise. By merely existing it must sacrifice much, if not indeed all, of its essence. The metaphysical complications with which this field abounds are quite implicit in this last statement, but I hope at this point its plain truth can be accepted without our getting into metaphysics. Pure expressionism must also be, by definition, pure subjectivity. As our mortal cast prevents us from entering into anything



outside ourselves, if we are to come to grips with essential reality the only hunting ground lies within. But total inwardness, when brought out and given tangible existence in the compromise form of a painting or play, can only have significance in this form if it still manages to communicate; that is, if the artist's meaning can be grasped by others. And such a grasping must be at the same profound level, of soul or primal experience, in which the author conceived it, for any other communication is totally meaningless. And this is not to skirt the fact that an open question remains as to whether such real communication is in fact possible. But the real point of significance is this: pure artistic expressionism (our definitive impossibility) would have only content and no form, and anything "expressionistic" that is less than pure, as everything tangible must be, represents a humanizing compromise. The value of the product rests in how this compromise is achieved. There are, thus, two essences of expressionism, which we will see confirmed in A Dream Play: firstly, pure expressionism equals pure subjectivity; and secondly, form in expressionism is insignificant, while content is everything.

Strindberg's dream plays represent an instinctive artist making the compromise with reality probably as cleanly as this can be done dramatically. Strindberg grasped, as I said, that the dream is one of the keys to inner man, and that it comes as close to the world of essences in its characteristics as any human experience. And if the content and form of one man's dream cannot signify wholly for any other, the common basis on which communication can at least start remains in the tangible fact of all humans being subject to dreams.





I quote some of Strindberg's short preface to A Dream Play, which could almost be a creed for the principles of expressionist drama:

In this dream play, . . . the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations.

The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallise, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all--that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates, and since on the whole, there is more pain than pleasure in the dream, a tone of melancholy, and of compassion for all living things, runs through the swaying narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Several characteristic features of expressionist drama are pointed out here to which I might call attention. As pure inner reality and spiritual truth first of all, time and space in the play are dispensed with--as truth is forever beyond time and space. Characters are young, grow old, and become young again within the compass of one scene. The dramatist, by this characteristic, receives the license to proceed in any manner he sees fit, and, with abstraction, distortion, and stylization, the later expressionists exploited their freedom to the full. And by the same characteristic, which involves the total repudiation of human realism, recognition of the medium as a stage with actors on it is automatically accorded, as Ortega y Gasset's essay pointed out. Though the preface only vaguely intimates it, the spirit of A Dream Play itself is profoundly religious, which is again a natural characteristic of essential reality. The pure subjectivity of the vision is emphasized in the play's imaginative framework of "memories, fancies" etcetera, as noted in the preface, and is confirmed in the narrative itself, where the seemingly unattached occurrences that cause crises in the minds of the characters





(such as the "Swiss Family Robinson" incident, the bestowal of the degree and the stage-door fixation) are drawn from actual traumatic experiences at various times in Strindberg's own life. I do not have space here even to begin interpreting the play in terms of its argument, but the point is that, as we noted earlier, this is not in fact important in any case. The "absurdities" not open to rational exposition are indeed, as the preface notes, manifold, and the play clearly means nothing but as a totality. Content, we must remember, is everything, form nothing in expressionism. And what the play means, if it is successful, can only really be experienced, not talked about. The play has a pervasive motif, pronounced at various points by the daughter of Indra, that in a sense contains its "message," as it were--"Mankind is pitiable." This phrase in A Dream Play carries the same profound depth of meaning as the final pious "Amen" of The Father. Similar motifs become a characteristic feature of later expressionist drama, and that such a motif appears to be the merest platitude underlines perfectly one of the basic weaknesses of expressionism: the practical impossibility of conveying any slightest inkling to an observer of what an experience of profound spirituality really signifies.

There is one other very important point that I should also call attention to before leaving Strindberg's preface: he uncannily anticipates Freudian dream psychology, and what it shows is that Strindberg understands the nature of his mission in these plays, that he is conveying pure truth. It is in his disavowal of control over what the play sets out: "He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates," which means in effect that as primal archetypal wisdom, what is contained in



his play is not his work, but comes from beyond him, for the expression of which he himself is only the agent.

My discussion of expressionism so far has concentrated on what are basically points of theory, but I should also call attention to a few more significant features of expressionist technique. With naturalism's back broken, standard old dramatic techniques such as the monologue and the aside find new life and prominence in expressionist drama. Poetry too, ancient and proverbial vehicle for the expression of primal wisdom, has a primary affinity with expressionist theory so obvious as scarcely to require comment. The protagonist of A Dream Play, the dreamer and mediating consciousness, is "The Poet" in the best classical tradition, and most of the later expressionists wax poetic in their plays at critical junctures of emotional intensity. I call attention here to these particular expressionist techniques for the reason that all of them appear in Auden's plays. Though it is obvious that other models than the expressionists' could well be, and indeed are, operative in Auden's case, the fact that such techniques were current and acceptable in modern drama was due principally to the work of the expressionists.

The real boom in dramatic expressionism came, of course, during and after World War I, with the German stage as its focus. Strindberg was very widely played in Germany in this period and was recognized as the father of the style. Auden was an avid student of all the expressionists and though his greatest debt may be to Strindberg, there are other non-Strindbergian expressionist devices he employs which should be noted.

While adhering to the idea of expressionism, the forms of humanizing compromise adopted by Strindberg's successors showed great variation







from his own. Perhaps indeed one of the greatest weaknesses of much of the later expressionistic drama, when it attempts to follow Strindberg into non-realism, with music and startling tableaux of symbolic figures, is that the lesser playwrights' effects are so obviously strained-for and contrived when compared with the inspired sincerity evident in Strindberg's dream plays. Such for instance is the fate of the final dream scene in Auden's The Ascent of F6, so much more eloquent of the author's mental chaos than in any way convincing or of theatrical value as a psychological projection of the play's theme. The greatest of the later expressionists, perhaps Kaiser and Toller, find their own formula for voicing the message of the spirit, which, though different in form, succeeds in retaining the key factor of subjective sincerity and truth that is the greatness of Strindberg's expressionism. Kaiser is probably the first consistent user of characters as representative types or symbols of a class, a device which Auden employs extensively. We remember the expressionist's mission as the presentation of essential reality, which clearly only the typical can represent. The Cashier hero of From Morn to Midnight, for instance, obviously represents the type of a bank clerk, or as Kaiser's biographer-critic Kenworthy says, "any man who is condemned by social conditions and his passive acceptance of them to the monotonous drudgery of competitive bread-winning."<sup>6</sup> The cashier's awakening being triggered by the sexual impulse again shows clearly the fundamental relation of Freudian thinking to expressionism, and is as well a highly subjective expression of the dramatist. Kaiser's solution to the problem of communication with his audience, which Strindberg overcomes with only the force of his impassioned art, is to



make considerable concessions to a form of naturalism. Though highly stylized, scenes that could be naturalistic in another context are interspersed with the starkest expressionism, and the whole makes a coherent exposition. Thus, the Cashier leaves his very tangible and typical bourgeois household to find himself wandering in a symbolic landscape of snows and skeleton-like trees while his subconscious erupts in impassioned soliloquy.

Awareness that man's fundamental maladjustment is not only individual but collective as well, which we might consider as only implied in Strindberg, becomes in the German expressionists, if I may be pardoned a generalization, the main problem with which their theatre deals. With the eruption in the 1910-20 decade of all the bedlam that Ibsen and Dostoevski had so prophetically shown as latent in man, it was perhaps inevitable that general social questions would come to occupy these playwrights. And, as political creeds are, in a sense, religion transferred to the earthly sphere, the expressionists' essential reality is thus still served equally by the treating of social and political themes. While he is too wise to offer any panacea for its alleviation, the main purport of Kaiser's trilogy of The Coral, Gas I and Gas II, is that man is doomed while his society adheres to the false god of the machine, making a machine of man himself and subverting his humanity. In the plays of Toller, who was a committed revolutionary imprisoned for his part in the uprising of 1919, the political tone is even more explicit, and the socialist's compassion for the lot of the proletarian is the heart of Toller's work. And I might quote Toller to point up that a political orientation is in no way at variance with the idea of





expressionism:

Proletarian art must ultimately rest on universal human interests, must, at its deepest, like life or death, embrace all human themes. It can only exist where the creative artist reveals that which is eternally human in the spiritual characteristics of the working people.<sup>7</sup>

Though I have scarcely touched even the highlights of the expressionist theatre and must leave much that would amply warrant extended discussion, I have brought out I think most of what is essential for an understanding of Auden's general debt to the expressionists. Auden's intense preoccupation with scientific depth psychology in all of its ramifications indicates an obvious profound sympathy with Strindberg, while his urgent political concern, among other things, shows him clearly aware of the later styles as well. He has borrowed from various places. I have mentioned the dream scene of The Ascent of F6 and its link to Strindberg; The Dance of Death title was employed by Strindberg before Auden as well (though because of the lengthy tradition behind this name the connection here could be merely fortuitous); and the important figure of the Abbot, the symbol of conscience in The Ascent of F6 bears a strong resemblance to a similar-functioning priest in Strindberg's There Are Crimes and Crimes. Similarly, the germ of The Dance of Death may trace back to the restaurant scene of Kaiser's From Morn to Midnight; and these are not all the instances of possible and probable borrowings that could be cited. Though expressionism in painting has shown surprising vitality in resisting any return to vogue of representative art, the fate of dramatic expressionism has been less impressive. While the reasons for its decline in drama may be many and complex, it is interesting that drama in the last fifty years (what we might call its mainstream at least) has really done little more than follow a pattern established in the works of the last century's greatest master of dramatic method--and we light again on Strindberg. It cannot be said with any certainty what prompted





Strindberg's return to a form of naturalism in his final great flowering, but it is a good possibility that, as usual far ahead of his time, he realized the built-in limitations in terms of audience communication that go along with the idea of expressionist drama, and concluded that its theatrical possibilities were severely restricted. The almost totally unfathomable works of some of the later expressionists like Kokoschka<sup>8</sup> would in any case go far toward backing up such a conclusion.

While the various devices and ideas he borrows from the expressionists are of considerable importance in Auden's plays--most of them reflecting Auden's interest in psychology--his theatre, in general terms of style and purpose, has a more important immediate link with the theatrical style usually associated with the name of Bertolt Brecht, that Brecht called "epic;" To a very large extent in fact, the plays we are considering here are the fruit perhaps mainly of the Brechtian epic theatre influence over Auden, begun during the year Auden spent in Germany, 1928-29. An association established between Auden and Brecht at that time lasted until Brecht's death, when as late as 1947 Auden was Brecht's choice to translate the songs of The Caucasian Chalk Circle. In his most impressionable period, Auden found himself in Germany when the German stage was at the apex of its experimental phase, with very exciting things happening. The natural affinity both Auden and Isherwood formed with the Brecht group's theatrical work almost certainly has its roots in their sharing of similar strongly felt political views. The prominent leftist bias in Auden's plays, at least at the surface level, echoes the same bias in the early Brecht. Brecht, in some of his lesser plays, is often much more doctrinaire than Auden ever is, but the





political implications remain a very central part of Auden's dramas.

While epic theatre, as it evolved, was in a sense a calculated repudiation of expressionism, as Brecht and others had seen the excesses to which expressionism tended to degenerate, it was still an offshoot of expressionism in the sense that the primary function of epic theatre was to be anti-illusionist in the same way as expressionism, though not for the same reasons. The social/political slant that I have said expressionism frequently took on was the fundamental impulse behind epic theatre. Before Brecht, people like Erwin Piscator, a communist and a highly talented producer whose productions of various of Toller's plays were landmarks in expressionist staging, had been seeking to exploit the class war and make the theatre into an arena for the presentation of essentially propagandistic material.

And the new theatrical principle the propagandists' ideas involved was audience participation in the events of the stage in a new way. Eric Bentley<sup>9</sup> quotes Piscator's interesting description of a 1924 production of his entitled The Rowdy Red Revue (Revue Roter Rummel) in which many odd things happen, most of them very crude from the standpoint of aesthetics, but which illustrate the kind of intellectual involvement of the audience the propagandists wished to achieve.

. . .the start of the production. Music. The lights go out. Silence. In the audience two men are quarreling. People are shocked. The dispute continues in the gangway. The footlights are switched on and the disputants appear before the curtain. They are two workmen talking about their situation.

This was clearly carrying audience participation to a point no theatre art of the previous century advanced it, and though Brecht's dramas, mercifully, show considerable refinement over such a crude beginning,





the principle of intellectual rather than emotional involvement of the audience that Piscator aims for, remains the basic aim of the Brechtian theatre as well. And I have quoted this description of Piscator's here particularly because the link between this approach and Auden's is very clearly apparent, especially in The Dance of Death where Auden writes parts spoken from the audience into the play in precisely the same manner.

Working closely for several years with Piscator and other collaborator-friends--actors, directors and set designers--Brecht refined the idea of intellectual stimulation in the theatre into a new theatrical philosophy in which drama was not only to entertain, but above all to enlighten, to instruct the common man. Brecht wrote several short plays that he called Lehrstücke or "teaching plays" to emphasize this principle, and everything in the drama was to be subordinate to it. It was to be a completely anti-Aristotelean concept of the drama where the spectator was very pointedly not to become immersed in the dramatic illusion, but rather to stand apart from it and be made to observe and think. Though most of Brecht's voluminous writings through which he sets up the theoretical basis for his kind of playwriting were yet to be done when Auden and Isherwood were writing their plays, the example of his early works, The Threepenny Opera, Mahagonny, and the Hauspostille poems--works to which Auden admits his own dramas were greatly indebted--contained most of the important elements later codified.

And to achieve in his dramas the atmosphere whereby catharsis and identification in the mind of the spectator with the actors are banished from the theatre, Brecht used various methods based on a principle he



called Verfremdung or "alienation." The application of this principle involves many things for Brecht's plays but all come down chiefly to being devices designed to ensure that the spectator maintains his attitude of detachment and his interest in the events of the stage as a spectacle of life theatrically presented--never confusing it with life itself. In The Threepenny Opera for example, Brecht had boards suspended from the flies bearing in title form a wry summary of the action of each scene. The boards serve constantly to remind the spectator that he is in a theatre, and at the same time force the actors to approach their roles in a new, deeper, external way to make allowance for the spectator's informed position. Such elements are essential points of epic theatre.

Complex seeing must be practised. Though thinking about the flow of the play is more important than thinking from within the flow of the play. Besides which, the boards compel and enable the actors to achieve a new style. This style is the epic style. In reading the projections on the boards the spectator takes up the attitude of one who smokes at ease and watches. By such an attitude the spectator immediately forces from the actor a better and fairer performance; for it is hopeless to attempt to 'spellbind' a man who is smoking and who is therefore pretty well pre-occupied with himself.<sup>10</sup>

One thing notable in epic style is that its successful application demands an unprecedented degree of cooperation and mutual understanding of each others' positions and needs between author, directors, actors and audience. The Group Theatre for which Auden and Isherwood were writing--both were instrumental in its founding as well--was formed with the express intention of fostering precisely this kind of cooperation, and obviously under the influence of Brechtian theory.

The other numerous devices for achieving the required aesthetic "distancing" of epic theatre are quite diverse. Scenery, for instance, in his plays, Brecht characteristically leaves incomplete; it will be





realistic scenery but in various ways left in skeletal form. Music, of course, is a fundamental, and along with this, verse. And Brecht would insist that the orchestra sit in plain view of the audience. I am only pointing out the obvious, of course, by noting that music, for example, in the Brecht/Weill operas is an absolutely fundamental part of the experience of the work, and scarcely a mere device as I might seem to have implied; but the point remains that the theoretical justification for its presence in epic theatre is still based on the distancing or alienation principle. And to keep the spectator even more from succumbing to the stupor of sustained empathy Brecht's scenes are usually short and broken by interludes that pointedly violate fourth-wall convention--usually something choric in form, commenting on what has been presented or what is to come. Auden's use of a chorus or its equivalent in almost all of his plays, in the manner in which he employs it, is a quite direct application of Brechtian ideas.

Adhering then to the two basic laws, of entertainment and intellectual instruction--and with the first theoretically subordinate to the second--the informing principle that governs both content and form in a Brecht play relates again very closely with the far left-of-centre political position of the playwright. Brecht's plays achieved their great popularity because they speak directly on the level of the common man--the proletariat on whom Brecht pinned what hope he had for man's future. His writings had always in mind the needs of this un-highbrow audience. Thus, the emotional confusions of expressionism have no place on the Brechtian stage. Auden, on this point, of course, deviates markedly from Brecht as we have already noted. Part of this deviation stems from



Auden's preoccupation with psychology--his attempting always to get at the subconscious motive behind the overt act--but it arises perhaps mostly from Auden's always highly idiosyncratic poetic style, which is at times about as far from the plain-spoken and often slangy Brecht as it is possible to get. Auden remains strongly influenced by Brecht in style too, but the point they really differ on is that Brecht always, as John Willet<sup>11</sup> says, wrote for the "overcoat-weavers," the common man, while Auden, on the contrary, is writing for a highly sophisticated audience; their two styles reflect the divergence. Brecht was deeply influenced by Dr. Waley's translation of Chinese poetry and the Japanese Nō plays. What he admired particularly in these works was their verbal simplicity and concentration of word energy. Because it is plain, spare, and real, language like this conveyed for Brecht an essential quality of social realism, and this quality he strove to achieve in his own plays. Such a style can be (and is) poetry too for all its plainness, but it is a down-to-earth poetry with nothing about it of the ivory tower. The other prominent influences in the Brecht language too, notably Kipling and François Villon, are poets of manifestly the same earthiness. And again, the integral inclusion of popular, cabaret-style music and song that is the feature of Mahagonny and The Threepenny Opera is part and parcel of the same proletarian approach. The music is the light touch--with its overtones of the music-hall--and it is absolutely essential in Brecht's work, in mitigating, for the proletariat, the seriousness of the issues being discussed. Through it the plays attain the lively power that so many of the ponderously serious expressionist experiments lack. It is perhaps the one redeeming feature of Auden's





dramas that, using the example of Brecht, they manage to retain a good deal of the same spirit of earthy high-jinks and music-hall comedy: it often greatly lightens the load of what would otherwise tend to leave the spectator oppressively bored. I will come to discuss this element in Auden's dramas later, but it is important to note here that it is a clear inheritance from Brecht.

The influences on Auden discussed in this chapter constitute, then, probably most of what was essential in the theatrical background to Auden in writing his plays. I might mention that some critics consider that Auden's connection with T. S. Eliot, (who has his own examples of poetic drama--Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes was the Group Theatre's first production--and had plumped long in his essays for a twentieth-century revival of poetic drama) is very important. In a general way this may be so, but I do not think Eliot's particular theatrical style was influential in Auden's case. Auden's poetry is always idiosyncratic; his themes are his own and are above all modern in outlook and treatment. To present in "epic"-style drama a picture of society, which is essentially what Auden's plays attempt to do, was an approach he derived from Bertolt Brecht. And with the peculiar--and peculiarly modern--preoccupations his plays bring out, when Auden is being serious, far more than Sophocles or even Eliot in the background I see Strindberg and the expressionists; and when he is having fun, as he does frequently too, there is clearly no one there but Brecht--and Auden himself, of course.



## II

### FIRST ATTEMPTS

The theatrical inheritance of Auden and the Group Theatre is plain in this description of the Group's aims given in the January 24, 1935 number of the Times Literary Supplement:

Mr. Auden is a practical dramatist, for he works in association with a band of players, the Group Theatre. . . . This group announce their form as "realistic fantasy" in which realistic incident and fantastic illusion are combined and players, author, and producer all seek to develop a common united style.

The Auden/Rupert Doone alliance was clearly patterned on the early Brecht/Piscator model, and with a little broadening out the Group Theatre's platform would serve epic theatre's ends equally well.

Auden's first attempt at drama, his "charade," Paid on Both Sides, predates the Group Theatre's founding, but its aim as drama is essentially along the lines the Group later advocated. While there are in these early plays, and typical of Auden early and late, various obscurities of a quite unfathomable nature (obscurities which appear to a perhaps somewhat lesser extent in the later plays with Isherwood), a clear distinction can be made here between what the early plays are and what the later plays attempt to be. Basically the difference is that Auden attempts to do less in the early efforts. It is a difference especially notable in Paid on Both Sides. I should be inclined to say that in Paid on Both Sides Auden still thinks of himself as primarily a poet, subordinating the idea of drama to a poetic aim. There is action in Paid on Both Sides in a dramatic sense, yes, but the complications of interacting three-dimensional characters that are the prime requisite of





real drama, and that mark Auden's own later plays as well, is not in this instance fully exploited. And what remains memorable in Paid on Both Sides, because of this approach, is not really the situation or characters, but individual poems. So that while Auden himself would accord it little significance from a dramatic standpoint (as far as I have been able to discover, Paid has never been performed), as poetry he takes it very seriously indeed, having salvaged from this work more individual poems for his collected works than from any other of his dramas except The Dog Beneath the Skin.

But I am perhaps getting into territory here that might more profitably be left until later to treat fully. Paid on Both Sides as a whole is now a neglected work, one which only the student of Auden is likely to find necessary to read. And since, therefore, few readers remain who can be counted on to have any familiarity with the complete piece, I will assume the reader's unfamiliarity in my discussion here, and recapitulate the whole play in outline, commenting as it unfolds.

Located both spatially and temporally in a vague and indefinite milieu, the play's ostensible plot revolves around a feud, of generations' standing, between two families, the Nowers of Lintzgarth (village? county?) and the Shaws of Nattrass. It is Christmas Eve. Fragments of sometimes cryptic conversation between members of the Nower family in their redoubt open the play, imparting all that we are to be given of the circumstantial background to the feud. There are several interesting features of theatrical style manifested early in the play to which I might call attention. The initial stage direction shows a debt to Brecht and very probably to Kaiser as well:



[No scenery is required. The stage should have a curtained-off recess. The distinction between the two hostile parties should be marked by different coloured arm-bands. The chorus, which should not consist of more than three persons, wear similar and distinctive clothing.]<sup>1</sup>

The break at this point with realistic staging is seen to be complete. The bare stage is basically Brechtian, while the device of distinguishing the warring factions by colors may go back to Kaiser. Color symbolism is a prominent feature of Kaiser's art, and in the expressionistic Gas II, in an identical manner, he used yellow and blue uniforms as the only distinguishing mark between the representatives of two warring principles --symbolically implying that in their depth of folly they are equal and indistinguishable, which is precisely what Auden intends in Paid on Both Sides.

The completely anti-realistic orientation of the work continues, not only in the staging, but even more pointedly in its language--the conversations and choric orations that occupy the initial half of the play. Auden, who throughout his career has gained considerable reputation for his daring and versatile experimentation in verse forms, at the time he wrote Paid on Both Sides was fascinated with the possibilities for modern English poetry in the Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon style. He had attempted to transmit something of the feeling of saga poetry into many of the poems he was writing around this period and with no little effectiveness he grafts this style on to his first play. The characters speak in irregular alternate passages of prose and verse, and the unusual sound affects both media, though in different ways. In the verse the pseudo-Anglo-Saxon style comes of course closer to its original than in the prose, because the typical Anglo-Saxon devices Auden employs in his





verse--the kenning, litotes, the inversions for metrical consistency, and the rest--are strictly applicable only to poetry. Though elsewhere Auden has attempted, with varying success, to make free adaptation even of alliteration from Anglo-Saxon, in this instance he uses his "middle" style that with less technical complexity seems to retain a perhaps greater fidelity to the original in terms of sound and sentiment. It is the style that has achieved such memorable successes as the well-known "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle," and in the best passages in this play it reaches equivalent heights:

Often the man, alone shut, shall consider  
The killings in old winters, death of friends,  
Sitting with stranger shall expect no good.  
Spring came, urging to ships, a casting off,  
But one would stay, vengeance not done; it seemed  
Doubtful to them that they would meet again. (205)

Adapting freely for his prose, the style here gives a clipped, harsh, elliptic sound, with a curiously grim power in the particular context of this play:

T. [Trudy] You've only just heard?

W. [Walter] Yes. A breakdown at the Mill needed attention, kept me all morning. I guessed no harm. But lately, riding at leisure, Dick met me, panted disaster. I came here at once. How did they get him?

T. In Kettledale above Colefangs road passes where high banks overhang dangerous from ambush. To Colefangs had to go, would speak with Layard, Jerry and Hunter with him only. . . . Hunter was killed at first shot. They fought, exhausted ammunition, a brave defence but fight no more. (200)

An insensitive critic has called this Auden's "telegraphese," but a second careful reading makes easily and abundantly clear it is nothing so mechanically inane. Rather, it is a calculatedly outlandish but carefully controlled prose style, whose use is integral to Auden's purpose in the play. This purpose is in essence mythic; another aspect of it is the indefiniteness in space and time of the play's setting already



mentioned, and I will return to it later for full discussion.

Allowing for the syntactical oddness of speech, Auden establishes in the play's opening exchanges a semi-naturalistic environment in a quite acceptable Brechtian style; that is to say, the characters and the events referred to have clear reference to a recognizable and essentially normal human pattern. We are looking in on the headquarters redoubt of the Nower family, and the view we get of the feud is theirs, but though their talk is animated by the defiant clan spirit that puts the enemy always in the wrong, the lack of reference to the start and cause of the feud plus their own women's bitter realization of the ultimate senselessness of it all leaves the reader in no doubt as to the author's point.

T. I am sick of this feud. What do we want to  
go on killing each other for?  
We are all the same. He's trash, yet if I cut  
my finger it bleeds like his.

. . . . .  
Sometimes we read a sign, cloud in the sky,  
The wet tracks of a hare, quicken the step  
Promise the best day. But here no remedy  
Is to be thought of, no news but the new death;  
A Nower dragged out in the night, a Shaw  
Ambushed behind the wall. (205)

An oracular choric interlude on man's birth, death, and tribulations brought in here, further confirms our understanding of the feud's significance, and again sets up the mythic framework.

Like its language, the play's plot too is stripped to bare essentials. It can scarcely be said to have a plot at all in fact, or, one might say it has a plot as a parable has a plot. Its plot is the feud and nothing more. As with Brecht, only in a much more exaggerated, and perhaps fatally untheatrical way, we are never allowed to develop





sympathy with the characters for they never become more than detached voices to us. Things happen: Joan (John Nower's mother we are informed by the list of characters before the opening scene), shocked at the disastrous setback reported in the opening conversation quoted above, has given premature birth to a child. The child, of course, is symbolic of the new generation's destiny--forced unnaturally into life by the enormous and perverse pressures of an inheritance of distorted values, to be nurtured and moulded for refilling the gaps in the same distorted scheme.

Not from this life, not from this life is any  
 To keep; sleep, day and play would not help there  
 Dangerous to new ghost; new ghost learns from many  
 Learns from old termers what death is, where. (200)

Inevitably, thoughts of revenge for the ambush are uppermost in the clansmen's minds, and, possessed of information through the medium of the paid informer "Number Six" (absolutely no clue provided as to the significance of the curious name), that a "Red" Shaw (known to the Nowers) with a few confederates is to pass the day at "Brandon Walls," plans are quickly formed to return the compliment of the ambush. Before this main development is followed up, however, there occurs one of the play's significant encounters, from a thematic standpoint, to which attention should be drawn. "Dick," a Nower adherent, to the regret of John Nower, is determined to leave the old life and associations to take ship with his cousin for the Colonies. The thematic significance of this act is brought out in another choric comment later in the play. But in the meantime, breaking into a discussion of memorable rugger games and players of the past, report is brought to John Nower of the success of the Brandon Walls expedition. And a Shaw spy is caught



lurking outside and captured.

And at this point the precariously but so far effectively balancing framework of Brechtian epic realism is summarily thrust aside, with the introduction of a very odd scene, combining highly obscure symbolism and expressionistic techniques with a leaven of pure slapstick, that wholly defies rational elucidation. It would be impossible to comment on all of the details of this strange interlude; for the most part the ideas and symbols are so excessively private I could do very little to clarify them anyway, and too, more importantly, as a whole the interlude I feel has at best only a marginal significance as far as expanding and contributing to the play's theme is concerned. It is the sort of thing one must become accustomed to in Auden's plays, the frequent very short step from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The interlude begins with Father Christmas appearing on the stage to address the audience with the following words--which I quote as typical of Auden's tongue-in-cheek approach throughout this scene. It goes without saying that the explanation this typically enigmatic statement obviously demands is never granted the reader:

X. Ladies and Gentlemen: I should like to thank you all very much for coming here to-night. Now we have a little surprise for you. When you go home, I hope you will tell your friends to come and bring the kiddies, but you will remember to keep this a secret, won't you? Now I will not keep you waiting any longer. (209)

We are now treated to an expressionistic trial, "[John as the accuser. The spy as accused. Joan as his warder with a gigantic feeding bottle. Xmas as president, the rest as jury, wearing school caps.]"

One is reminded here, of course, of the dream-scene trial of Ransom in The Ascent of F6, showing Auden's continued interest in the trial motif.





The procession of outlandish events continues: witnesses "Po" and "Bo" are called, who utter each a stanza of intentionally obscure verse (typical line: "We baffle proof, speakers of a strange tongue.") Next appears "The Man/Woman" to utter in turn his/her twenty-five lines of highly esoteric jargon. John Nower shoots the Spy, who, however, makes a quick recovery at the hands of a "Doctor" out of pure burlesque (the doctor's bag contains "circular saws, bicycle pumps, etc."), who brings him around finally by extracting "an enormous tooth from the body." The commentary:

Ladies and Gentlemen, you see I have nothing up my sleeve. This tooth was growing ninety-nine years before his great grandmother was born. If it hadn't been taken out to-day he would have died yesterday. You may get up now. (213)

After a photographer snaps some pictures, John Nower and the spy plant a symbolic tree, uttering some pedestrian lines on a theme of man's responsibility to man, and the interlude lurches to a conclusion.

In the mounds of obscure symbolism that shroud the scene a few points at least respecting Auden's intention with it can be made. The basic motif is the need for resolution of the quarrels and divisions besetting society that the feud represents. The tree-planting and Father Christmas symbols patently exemplify this idea.

Another recognizable symbol is of course the feeding bottle and Joan as the mother/warder figure, a broad gesture by Auden toward his philosophical beacon, Freud. This psychological theme, here and elsewhere in the play, (which I shall discuss fully further on), is a crucial element in the pattern of myth around which Paid on Both Sides is built.

The comic doctor creation, interesting for its slapstick potential and effective as broad satire on the medical profession, does not, I



believe, have an intrinsically very profound thematic significance in its usage here. Satirization of the medical profession is very prominent in Auden's early iconoclastic verse--Auden's father was a doctor, so that Auden was particularly aware of the trade--and corresponds to the period when his interest in unconscious psychology found him a temporary disciple of the American "healer" Homer Lane, who taught that all disease was a manifestation of internal, spiritual disorder rather than ascribable to any physical cause outside the self.<sup>2</sup> Doctrine vaguely related to this is found also in the theories of Freud and Groddeck, who throughout the years have been the really great influences in Auden's psychological thought. A similar and more elaborate lampoon of doctors and medical science is one of the incidents in The Dog Beneath the Skin.

Though again it is of only marginal importance in the particular thematic context of this play, I should perhaps offer an explanation of another of Auden's favorite early motifs which has made an appearance here. It has been called the "public-school myth"; we have seen it cropping up in the discussions about rugger, mentioned as the other major conversation topic of the Nowers apart from the feud, and we see it again in the school caps worn by the symbolic jurymen in the fantasy interlude just discussed. This motif was made the main thematic focus of Auden's early difficult The Orators, and was integral to his early conceptions of British psychology, as the (in his view) distorted games and competitions-oriented "school" was symbolic of this psychology.

The remainder of the play returns to the "realistic fantasy" style of the beginning. Dick's departure and farewell is the first incident, and there is a deeply significant pronouncement by the chorus to commemorate his leaving (upon which again I will reserve comment until





my final summarizing discussion). The main theme of the feud is re-asserted in the next interlude, as the Shaws once again carry the fight back to the Nowers, the contending factions facing each other from opposite ends of the now expressionistic stage, conceived imaginatively as separated by a hill-enclosed valley, with each party dug in on its side. Another characteristically sudden mechanical shift then interrupts this sequence with the abrupt announcement that John Nower and Anne Shaw are to be married, bringing the theme of harmony and resolution of old quarrels for the first time in at the level of the surface plot. That this sort of shift, without preliminary preparation, can be accepted by the reader with the feeling that it is normal illustrates the sort of movement within his play Auden is trying to achieve. The characters are, and remain, flat and puppet-like throughout, without signifying, or needing to signify, anything beyond their possession of a name and a voice.

There is a symbolic crossing-over of figures from each side of the stage to the other, marking the consolidation of the new and shaky unity: "Now this shall end with marriage as it ought." John and Anne engage briefly in a verse duologue on the theme of the meaning of love, and in their talk a general difference in point of view is plain: while Anne's urgent concern is staked in the future, John has difficulty extricating himself from the mire of the past:

A. John, I have a car waiting. There is time  
to join Dick before the boat sails. We sleep in beds  
where men have died howling.

J. You may be right, but we shall stay.

John's seeming incapability of accepting love at its face value underscores not only the virtual inevitability of the backward turn that



events must later take, but is a statement as well of a very important and recurrent theme in Auden, both in his plays and his poetry: the utter inadequacy of the sentiment of human love, as the weak and disturbed emotions of psychologically disoriented man are capable of embracing it, of even beginning to cope with the problems of mind and spirit for which it is the ostensible solution. And as the wedding feast takes place (in another fantasy interlude during which, among other things, a member of the audience dances on stage), what we know must happen does indeed come about: urged by his rigid and unregenerate mother, Seth Shaw reluctantly seizes the opportunity, like a saga villain, of gaining final revenge for his slaughtered father and brother, kills John Nower--guest in his own home--and the Nowers flee, certain to return with fighting reinforcements. And with a final mournful chorus, the play ends, as we see, exactly where it began:

Chorus. Though he believe it, no man is strong.

He thinks to be called the fortunate,  
To bring home a wife, to live long.

But he is defeated; let the son  
Sell the farm lest the mountain fall;  
His mother and her mother won. (222)

I might say, at this point, that I do have a reason for having dwelt at some length on this play which, as I said at the beginning of this discussion, is neither the most ambitious nor the most mature of Auden's dramatic works. Auden introduces in Paid most of the important themes that continue to occupy him in the later works, and a discussion of them now is a necessary preparation for their presentation in the later context. It might, for example, be noted that this play is not so obviously concerned with finding a political solution for man's problems





as the later plays appear to be. But I can show, both that the later plays are not so propagandistic as they might seem at first reading, and also that politics do have their part to play in Paid. The difference is merely one of a slightly changed emphasis.

The central theme of Paid on Both Sides, supported by all of Auden's resources of language and technique, is the myth. The geographic and chronological vagueness, the very elaborately contrived idiom that attempts to embrace both the modern and the immemorial, the intangibility of the characters as people, all combine to evoke the mythic quality. The play's world is Kentucky, it is contemporary England, it is the world of the old Norse sagas; its brutality is the Nazi brutality of World War II. The sides are families or they are nations; it is intended to present, in fact, a picture in allegory of the perennial condition of man. It is a weakness of the play, of course, that the picture is scarcely a complete one or completely coherent, and that speculation must therefore be a not insignificant part of the critic's task.

The point then, at once central and elementary, on which the play fixes as the key feature of the society it depicts, is the feud. As in the Norse sagas, war is seen as society's normal and perennial condition, with peace and suspension of hostilities at best a temporary state, its breakdown and the return to the normalcy of armed contention as inevitable as tomorrow's sunrise. Youthful and oversimplified such a view may be, but it is a view which permeates all of Auden's early writings, where the "war myth" is perhaps his most insistent theme. We are not primarily concerned here with the various ways in which Auden employs his war symbolism in the early writings; this is well analyzed elsewhere in any



case,<sup>3</sup> but usually, and this is the significant point, it is plotted poetically in a pattern of "we" versus "they." The difficulty with early Auden--The Orators again is the classic instance--is in pinning down exactly who "they" are supposed to represent. Whoever "they" are, however, they are invariably linked with forces of reaction and find themselves at the same time in the camp with the older generation.<sup>4</sup> I bring this supplementary information in here mainly because the "we"- "they" opposition perhaps illustrates Auden's intent a little more clearly than just the war symbol itself as we have it in Paid--we can see it now in Paid too, of course, where it is fundamentally the older generation that is responsible for maintaining the state of feud. But, equally importantly, the "we" versus "they" opposition shows also how Auden's war myth pattern bears a clear analogical relationship with the Hegelian and Marxist thesis-antithesis-synthesis doctrine of social evolution. Whether Auden turned toward Marxism because it agreed with his own analysis, or whether his own view perhaps derives in part from his reading of Marx is difficult to say; but this is not important. What is important, and this is especially what Paid on Both Sides illustrates, is that while Auden's view has the Marxist element, it is clearly itself quite a different animal.

While Auden would agree with Marx that the dialectical principle to a large degree governs social progress, his own Freudian bent makes him highly aware of the humanistic shortcomings in the purely economic or social focus of the Marxist system. The possibility of a new life through a complete rejection of the old (that is, through revolution) is what Dick's remove to the colonies--the new and unknown land--in fact





symbolizes in this play.

To throw away the key and walk away  
 Not abrupt exile, the neighbours asking why,  
 But following a line with left and right  
 An altered gradient at another rate  
 Learns more than maps upon the whitewashed wall  
 The hand put up to ask; and makes us well  
 Without confession of the ill. All pasts  
 Are single old past now, although some posts  
 Are forwarded, held looking on a new view;  
 The future shall fulfil a surer vow  
 Not smiling at queen over the glass rim  
 Nor making gunpowder in the top room,  
 Not swooping at the surface still like gulls  
 But with prolonged drowning shall develop gills. (215)

This quotation is from the chorus' comment on Dick's departure to which allusion was made earlier. The following of "an altered gradient at another rate" is his metaphor for the self-imposed revolutionary break with the past, and the turning of the back on history: thus "the future shall fulfil a surer vow," while "all pasts are single old past now." Plunged into waters unknown, and recognizing the dangers therein, the revolutionary's hope is only through "prolonged drowning [to] develop gills"--the image here is based on Darwin, with whom Marx has much in common. The real point here though, is that such a change for Auden remains only an elective possibility, and is clearly not necessarily "in the nature of things" as the true Marxist would have it. It is indeed something of a paradox that it finds a place in this play at all, where the real focus is on the problems of the John Nowers--those who must stay. And, as we see again, in contrast with the possibility offered of escape through revolution, which "makes us well without confession of the ill," the prison of those who remain is their "ill," or more aptly, their guilt, so much a part both of society and of the individuals of



which society is composed that they neither can nor wish to renounce it. This is the problem about which Auden has most to say, both in this play and in the later plays, and it is here that he applies his psychological, (probably mainly Freudian) readings.

Auden's assessment of John Nower and his society is a crude application of the ideas of Freud, with Nower and his society conceived as self-imprisoned by their own subconscious guilt. Among Freudian elements in the play, several might be pointed out: the general emphasis on parent/child relationships, for example, or the guilt repression syndrome itself. Particular Freudian references and comments dot the whole narrative: the "his mother and her mother won," for example, as a weak flourish at Oedipal fixations. Especially in the fantasy interlude do the Freudian implications obtrude: the Man-Woman figure speaks vaguely of "lying with" someone, and of someone "playing with" himself; and the wild tooth symbol is very likely taken directly from Freud's discussion of "tooth" dreams (as symbols of homosexual tendencies) in The Interpretation of Dreams.<sup>5</sup> And while there is a certain boldness of invention in Auden's psychological thesis, the adjective "crude" still applies, for the kind of generalization he tries to make of Freudian theory is of course plainly preposterous from the standpoint of scientific psychology; and it would indicate, not only in this play, but elsewhere in Auden, a somewhat superficial understanding of Freudian theory.<sup>6</sup>

Naive psychologizing is indeed only one, and at that scarcely the most serious, of the failures of Paid on Both Sides as a work of art. Its primary failures, certainly, are failures of dramatic function; it is a play after all, and yet its weakest qualities are precisely those





qualities in which strength is, in a play, indispensable. A drama, first of all, must be dramatic. The spectacle itself, the picture of life it gives, must awake a response in the spectator or it is not a drama, and in this sense Paid on Both Sides is not. Nor is it, I hasten to add, even closet drama; that is, it is not too complex in construction nor is it technically too demanding for the stage--it is merely wholly undramatic. One never has the feeling that life is being portrayed. The mythic idea behind the play makes a brilliant analogy with life, this is true, but the presentation itself at no point lives. Whether intentional or not, so subordinate is the ostensible plot to the grand mythic design that no impact, no drama from the play itself comes through. It is not impossible that this effect itself is intentional, to underline the thesis that we live only on the surface of our intellects; for certainly the surface is as far in as we ever get to our characters in this play. But if this is Auden's intention, he has not made it clear enough to us.

This difficulty indeed points up what is really probably the basic weakness of this play: its conception fundamentally lacks a plan. There must exist, for a successful drama, a plan or principle by which every speech, every dramatic element, has a considered and discernible relation to the whole--even if, as in Strindberg's dream plays, this relation is only grasped intuitively. It is Auden's conspicuous lack of plan that undermines everything he attempts in this play. If, for example, the superficiality, the nonpenetration is a part of Auden's dramatic technique, and, as suggested above, intended to contain its own moral, such intention is obscured by the concurrent attempt to create naturalistic qualities as well, and the result is an unnatural mixture.



He uses characters with names; their dialogue is presumably pregnant with background meaning; and yet in the end there was no need for names because the characters never develop individual significance, and much of the dialogue remains meaningless, apropos of absolutely nothing.

Again, the variety of startlingly incongruous styles that all end up appearing in this play testifies to the author's disorganization. A real playwright knows, and his audience knows, that what he is writing is a play--not a poem, not a revue, and not a Marx Brothers scenario. Auden appears never to be sure and the reader is caught in the middle. If a play's organization is sound, it is possible to combine grim tragedy and fantastic farce in one work; Ionesco can bring it off but Auden cannot. Were it not indeed for some sharp ideas, some insights, but most emphatically some brilliant poetic moments, this "play" would seem nothing but a collegiate prank.

The total departure, in terms of theatrical style, that The Dance of Death marks from Paid on Both Sides, is probably the most eloquent comment on Auden's own realization of his failure to communicate successfully in Paid on Both Sides. Though it has its own profound shortcomings as a play, from the standpoint of the particular weaknesses of Paid on Both Sides, The Dance of Death marks in various ways a clear improvement. We must remember though that now four years had elapsed and the Group Theatre had been formed; practical incentives now existed to make Auden pay attention to the necessities of communication. In this play, the basic necessity of plan he has kept clearly in mind, and, as well, avoided the mixture of genres that gave such confused results in Paid. His concentration, however, has cost Auden dearly, for though





Dance is coherent, controlled, sprightly, and even witty (much of which Paid is not), poetically it is a lesser achievement. Nothing has survived of Dance in the Collected Works. What it is important for is for what it taught Auden about his theatrical abilities that he was able to apply in his next, and greatest play, The Dog Beneath the Skin.

The Dance of Death was the archetypal Group Theatre work. Its style perhaps illustrates the Group's theoretical aim in drama in the purest form it ever reached on the stage. Their plays were to combine in their conceptions the talents of, principally, Auden and Rupert Doone (the Group Theatre's director), but secondarily, of actors and audience as well. As Julian Symons said, they had both "aesthetic ideas and a social attitude," "the first springing largely from Doone, the second from Auden."<sup>7</sup> Doone's theatrical training had been mainly in classical ballet, and the ballet influence shows up very strongly in Dance. The programme, written by Auden, that was handed out prior to the presentation of the play (perhaps to prepare the audience for what they would witness) shows in consecutive aphoristic paragraphs the merger of the several fields of interest:

Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy.

Drama is essentially an art of the body. The basis of acting is acrobatics, dancing, and all forms of physical skill. The music hall, the Christmas pantomime,<sup>8</sup> and the country house charade are the most living drama of today.

The programme went on to set out further aims as well: Drama should not be documentary (that was a province of the film), it should not analyse character (that was done by the novel). It should take for its subjects the universally familiar stories of its own society and generation.



"The audience, like the child listening to the fairy tale, ought to know what is going to happen next."<sup>9</sup>

If this programme is subjected to critical analysis, there is obviously much in it that requires elaboration in order really to signify anything (it would of course be doubtful if the youthful founders of the school themselves had taken the time to do so). I might point out in it the influence of Brechtian theory at various points: the demand for audience involvement, both physical and intellectual (as implied in the insistence that the audience should know what is to come) is one instance and the emphasis on physical action (Brecht was almost fanatic on the physical implications--the gestures and movements--of his "epic" acting) is another. It is also more than clear how well most of this creed would fit Paid on Both Sides. In The Dance of Death, however, the emphasis is on the music-hall connection rather than on the Christmas pantomime, and the result is a form of musical fantasy that ends up about as far removed from conventional drama as it is possible to get. Dance is the most propagandistic and doctrinaire of all of Auden's plays. The political influence of the Brecht circle over Auden was at its height in this period. Auden's formula for adapting the communist theme is, of course, far indeed from the way Brecht would take, but is typical of the symbolic-fantastic approach that characterized Paid on Both Sides, and that owes a large general debt to dramatic expressionism. Not the least of its differences, though, from Paid (and it aids greatly in clarity), is that Auden now employs a Brechtian announcer who explains to the audience the play's symbolism. He states the theme of the play before the curtain rises:

Announcer. We present to you this evening a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them. We show you that death as a dancer. Chorus (behind curtain). 'Our Death.'<sup>10</sup>







One learns, of course, early in reading Auden that deadpan pronouncements about the seriousness of his works are not always borne out in the works themselves. The Dance of Death is no exception, so that what we expect at this point is going to be a highly serious ballet of social protest or the like, is not exactly what Dance turns out to be. Dance precisely illustrates, in fact, the basic discrepancy that always exists between the aims of Brecht and Auden in their dramatic writings. In Brecht, the rejection of conventional theatre through his use of music, verse, and comedy, is always justified only on the Verfremdung and entertainment principles, and is at all times subordinate to the larger educational aim. With Auden, however, and especially in this play, one feels that he somehow loses control of his educational aim, and allows his popular song and music-hall parodies, and the general air of intellectual superiority to become ends in themselves, at the expense of serious satiric and educational effects. Doone had said the Group's dramatic style was to be "analogous to modern musical comedy,"<sup>11</sup> while sticking to its own primary aesthetic and social aim, but The Dance of Death comes really closer to being modern musical comedy, with, one might say, light satiric overtones--in other words, good clean fun. This, needless to say, is actually very far from Brecht, and in this discrepancy is defined the difference between Auden's style and real epic theatre. Brecht's theatre is intended for the masses and is fundamentally serious, whereas Auden's is clearly intended to pass over the masses' heads to speak to the upper-middle-class sophisticate; and real seriousness for it is, from a socio-political standpoint, at best



only theoretical. The sort of slipshod thinking and writing into which these plays are too frequently allowed to descend is a confirmation of this essentially unserious, almost lackadaisical, approach.

The sort of production that The Dance of Death is, then, could perhaps best be described, in our context, as resembling the fantasy interlude in Paid on Both Sides, but extended to embrace the whole play. The characteristics we noted there--expressionist techniques, slapstick humor, symbolism alternately lucid and obscure--are found equally in The Dance of Death, though modified and simplified for a more theatrical approach.

The key to understanding the play lies almost wholly in the Dancer; it must be borne constantly in mind that the Dancer always represents the Freudian death instinct in capitalist society. This is the only Freudian motif used in the play, but it is, as I shall later demonstrate, all-important to its theme.

The chorus, which acts essentially as a foil for the Dancer, represents the bourgeois level of society; the Dancer is their own death instinct. They, with some help from the audience who represent the proletariat, comprise basically the whole cast, with a few other symbolic characters out of classic German expressionism (ultimately from Kaiser, though extremely primitive in Auden). The play opens with the chorus' dance and song in celebration of society finding its current pitiful diversion (its means of evading tackling its really urgent problems) in the cult of physical culture:

Lie down on the sand  
 Feel the sun on your flesh;  
 It's so grand;  
 O Boy, you'll soon want to get fresh.

. . . . .





Europe's in a hole  
 Millions on the dole  
 But come out into the sun. (9)

The Announcer, placed on a step in front of the stage, mediates throughout between the audience and the events of the stage, and through him the audience is brought into the play itself. The Dancer's entrance is announced; and the Freudian implications in the chorus' adulation of him require no comment:

Vital young man  
 Do what you can  
 For our dust  
 We who are weak  
 Want a splendid physique  
 You must, you must.  
 Do not forsake us, make us, give us your word  
 As strong as a horse as quick as a bird. (11)

The Dancer, alter-ego of the chorus itself, doing the "Sun-God, creator and destroyer" dance lures the chorus into taking a symbolic swim (for which of course they are untrained and emerge badly chilled--another rather heavy-handed symbolic pricking of the imaginary balloon of bourgeois prowess), and while they are occupied, steals their clothes. And we are warned by the Announcer of the actual menace concealed in the Dancer's god-like exterior:

The young people turn to him now  
 in their green desire  
 Perhaps they imagine he'll set their  
 hearts on fire.  
 Will touch them alive as he touches  
 the barley seed--  
 Perhaps they'll find they've been  
 very mistaken indeed. (12)

The insidious ways of their own unconscious death instinct is then revealed to our bourgeois chorus in the symbolic offstage substitution of uniforms (the uniforms of the last performance) for the clothes they



had been wearing before they embarked on the physical fitness kick. The proletarian audience, not taken in, witnessed the theft and have accused the Dancer before his own bourgeois victims. The symbolic situation is for a moment tense, as the uniforms suggest another war and the audience incites the chorus to put them to good use right now:

One, two, three, four  
 The last war was a bosses' war.  
 Five, six, seven, eight  
 Rise and make a workers' state.  
 Nine, ten, eleven, twelve  
 Seize the factories and run them yourself. (16)

The theatre manager--typical bourgeois--seeing the chorus wavering, urges the Dancer to "Do something, man/As quick as you can." And at this, his instinct for self-preservation animated, the Dancer finds an out in demagoguery: "Dancer dances as the demagogue. The Chorus lose their menacing attitude and become fascinated. Crowd as ♂ Demagogue as ♀"

And revolutionary energies are thus at least temporarily rechanneled into a familiar outlet. The Announcer explains: "Comrades, I absolutely agree with you. We must have a revolution." But circumstances are different here from Russia; our revolution must be a revolution of "Englishmen for Englishmen." "After all, are we not all of one blood, the blood of King Arthur, and Wayland the Smith? . . . Lancelot's courage, Merlin's wisdom," etc. "Our first duty is to keep the race pure, and not let these dirty foreigners come in and take our job."

The Dancer's desperation move easily dupes the fickle chorus, who, after stopping to beat up the Jewish manager (the symbolic scapegoat) now assume "ship formation" to follow the Dancer wherever he may lead:

Take your place, take your place,  
 To save the Anglo-Saxon race,  
 Follow our gallant captain for ever  
 Our dandy, our dancer, our deep sea diver. (18)





But while this merry and confident procession is in progress, a new crisis arises: a symbolic storm. The audience, in this interlude, acts out the storm's elements ("We are lightning. Crash. Fizz. We are the thunder. Boom."), which I assume is intended to represent the Marxist doctrine that a ship of state is always really at the mercy of the proletariat.

During the storm the ship formation "gets more and more disintegrated. Dancer gradually works into a whirling movement which culminates in a falling fit." The Dancer is obviously near his end, but another of Auden's "doctors," from out of the audience, urged by a certain "Sir Edward" (who is in turn backed by a mysterious and even more powerful unnamed person), and acting against his own ethical judgment, gives the Dancer an injection to enable him to go on: "But mind. There's to be no excitement of any kind--no politics, for instance, something quite peaceful."

While up until now, as we have seen, the symbolism has been for the most part both obvious and doctrinaire, a certain degree of obscurity does descend over the episodes from this point. As far as the overt Marxian context of the play is concerned, the various alternate courses now attempted by the chorus or certain of its members, both with and without the guidance of the Dancer, represent just more false trails for a dying class to exhaust before in the course of history the inevitable overcomes them. But the precise nature and significance of these particular alternatives and of some of the symbolism and ideas they involve are not, however, quite so clear. We will do with it what we can.

Taking up, then, the cue of the doctor's quoted speech, while the



Dancer rests and recuperates, the chorus with characteristic heartiness enthusiastically embraces the new dictum:

B. Be true  
To the inner self. Retire to a wood  
The will of the blood is the only good  
We must learn to know it.

A. I see what you mean  
We must keep our primal integrity clean. (23)

But in their quickly mounting enthusiasm for the promised freedom of spirit, things begin to get out of hand again from the Dancer's standpoint. Words like "freedom" and "equality" form another possible threat, and at freedom of the sexes he is forced to draw the line. The reactionary ethic here is quite familiar, of course:

Announcer. It's about the girls. Man must be the leader whom women must obey. He must go forward into the unknown at dawn, while she waits at home trusting and believing in him, till at night he returns tired, and as such becomes as a little child again. This is her hour. She shall care for and refresh him that he may set out once more in search of the Ideal. (24)

The symbolism in the solution which the chorus now finds to placate its female members, is correspondingly transparent: they are turned into scenery. And once more harmony apparently reigns as all turn to celebrate in song the healing joys of country life:

How happy are we  
In our country colony  
. . . . .  
We live day and night  
In the inner light  
We contemplate our navels till we've second sight  
Gosh, it's all right  
In our country colony. (26)

The next episode, or sequence, is the most difficult in the play to interpret. A chorus member, falling out of step with the others, declares he will not dance any more, for "The Eternal word/ Has no habitation/ . . .





In the circumstances/ Of country dances/ It abideth alone;" and he who would seek the Ideal must "leave behind/ All love of his kind/ And fly alone/ To the Alone." This must be, by any standard, an odd context in which to introduce a theme of religious mysticism, but the intention I should say is clear. Quickly the chorus come to the realization that the dissenter is right, and the quest he proposes is the only real quest there is; and once again it is the still undaunted Dancer who appears to lead them:

Announcer. The most stupendous risk in human history is being undertaken this evening by a gentleman who prefers to remain known simply as the Pilot. His ambition is no less than to reach the very heart of Reality. (28)

Of course, he fails, and, typically, when the issue is perhaps fundamentally the most serious one the play takes up, in this very scene all the apparatus of burlesque-style slapstick humor finds its most extensive use. About the significance of the mysticism motif here it is difficult really to reach a firm conclusion; his mere introduction of it at this juncture in this play would seem to indicate the Auden considers it of some importance. And from what he tells us about it in the play, at least two possible conclusions can be drawn. Making the Dancer the chief figure in the quest would almost seem to imply that man's quest for eternity is really only a manifestation of his unconscious death instinct, and that it is tragically doomed from the beginning. On the other hand, the Dancer's failure to reach his goal could perhaps mean only that capitalism's death instinct blocks man's way to eternity, whereas under communism the way is still left open; and in this case, the neglect to follow up the quest again after the Dancer fails may be a calculatedly significant omission. It is one of those points on which,



in Auden, there are no hard and fast answers; and which, here as usual, is conveyed in so deliberately raffish and burlesque a tone that one strongly suspects there is nothing behind it but a leg-pulling anyway.

The Dancer, in any case, here begins his final collapse, "paralysed from the feet up." And once more the play falls back into fairly straightforward leftist politics. The audience begins to come up on the stage, while the announcer and the chorus sing responsively the final testament of the dying capitalist order--recapitulating a capsule history of capitalism, from the Greeks to the present day bourgeoisie--with the summarizing couplet:

Then they ruined each other for they  
                   didn't know how  
 They were making the conditions that  
                   are killing them now. (35)

Characteristic, of course, of a dead society is the fact that its own members are the last to realize their own demise, and British capitalism is no exception. The Jewish stage manager has returned, set up a "cosy little night-clob just like home" called "Alma Mater," where the last remaining dregs of the old order--Thieves, Blackmailers, Coiners, and old Hacks and Trots--gather to toast their eternal ellegiance to Alma Mater. Overt allusion is never made to the significance of the "Alma Mater" motif, but with what we know of Auden already (not to mention the suggestive name itself), the obvious and I think the certain conclusion is once again the Freudian Oedipal connotations--and we have really not moved far from the world of Paid on Both Sides.

And about all Auden's play lacks to complete the propagandistic parody it has become is now brought forth to supply the final funeral





oration over the defunct Dancer: a comic Karl Marx who renders his verdict in the best Kremlinese manner:

The instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated. (38)

To sum up the achievement of The Dance of Death, two main points first of all require to be made. If the play was intended as serious political satire it misfires, for obvious reasons. It is too blatant. Its final effect is to parody the propaganda play rather than to succeed in promoting a propagandistic point itself. And yet there does remain evidence, as I shall discuss below, that Auden does take the Marxism in it very seriously. The dilemma of his real intention remains unsolved.

From the standpoint of development of technique, we can see in The Dance of Death in various ways an advance over Paid on Both Sides. Auden has allowed the fantasy form to take over completely here, and, while he handles it somewhat loosely even yet, at least laughter in his audience must be conceded to be some improvement over head-shaking. Probably, though, the most important contribution which The Dance of Death makes to this thesis is in the shift observable here in Auden's handling of his two most important themes and areas of interest--politics and psychology. Where in Paid on Both Sides they remained alternative courses, as it were feeling their way toward a relationship, here--whether harmoniously or inharmoniously--they are neatly merged. We should consider how this merger is brought about, for it affects Auden's philosophy from Dance right through his pre-religious period, underlies much of his poetry of this time (and this is his best period as a poet), and certainly is vital to the plays we shall be discussing. We cannot be certain of the equation Auden uses to bring them together,



but there is at least one neat and plausible way in which this might be done. Freudian theory, first, in general terms analyzes the psyche of man as a dichotomy with two basic drives: Eros (life instinct) and the death instinct. These drives oppose each other, naturally, and the death instinct normally is forced to find its outlet in aggression against others. And though Freud might be hesitant about extending his analysis from individuals to societies,<sup>12</sup> Auden obviously has fewer scientific qualms. The basic tenet, then, in Marxism on which the principle of dialectical materialism is founded, is also a dichotomy: a universal dichotomy of Thesis versus Antithesis in a constant struggle destined to end only when the classless society evolves. And it is on this shared principle of dichotomy that Auden makes his analogy between Freud and Marx. Freud's idea of aggression as a manifestation of the death instinct is equated with the Marxian idea that aggressive imperialism is the final stage before the death of the capitalistic system. And at the same time the Marxian principle of Antithesis, through which the old form's dissolution is assured while the new is constantly evolving, is equated with Freud's Eros, or life principle. A makeshift analogy perhaps, but it seems at least to work in the symbolism of this play. We shall see too, as we proceed, that its relevance is equal in the later plays: indeed, it is even developed further, as an idea of a possible Synthesis based upon it begins to take shape toward the end of the cycle.





### III

#### THE MAJOR WORKS

In Auden's third play, The Dog Beneath the Skin, or Where's Francis?, the first of his collaborations with Isherwood, the most generally successful effort of all of the plays is achieved. Contemporary reviews recognized considerable improvement over The Dance of Death:

The Dog Beneath the Skin is in every respect a much more impressive work than Mr. Auden's earlier play, The Dance of Death. It is more precise, and therefore more pointed, in its choice of subject matter, more consistent and (for the most part) more mature in its satire, and, apart from its rather embarrassing conclusion, much less naively evangelistic in its political attitude.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps two chief improvements, indeed brilliancies of a quality not heretofore seen in Auden as a dramatist, stand out in The Dog Beneath the Skin to make it the formal and aesthetic success it is as compared to his previous efforts. One of these is unquestionably a new brilliance of imagination, and the other obvious outstanding quality is one of technique. It is their combination that brings the play off.

I might say also before beginning my analysis of the play that I shall not make any attempt here to distinguish or even speculate about any separate contributions made by Auden or Isherwood to it. I should say it is very likely that such new and important qualities as "consistency" and "maturity" noted in the above review are largely a reflection of the new presence of the Isherwood hand and mind in the play; Auden himself distinguished between himself and his friend in these terms in his "Birthday Poem (To Christopher Isherwood)" published in the same year as Dog (1935), where the "strict and adult pen" of Isherwood, so necessary "in this hour of crisis and dismay," is compared to the "flabby fancies"



by which he felt his own capabilities to be bound at this time.<sup>2</sup> From the technical standpoint, needless to say, these new qualities are, of course, all-important.

Imaginatively, first of all, the initial brilliance of Dog is in the structural metaphor on which the play is based--first the idea, and second, its embodiment in the play. As a basis, what was good in Dance has been re-used and improved in Dog. Dance was published in 1933, though not performed until 1935, and in the performance Auden learned what its strong points, as well as its defects were. One talent that it clearly disclosed was his great ability to compose light, musical-comedy style libretto verse: some examples of his brilliance in this vein we saw in the previous chapter; and this talent he exploited again to the full in Dog, but this time more effectively, because of his noticeably greater control and clarity in its use.

In The Dog Beneath the Skin Auden, for the first time, conceived a play unburdened by obscurities of form and method. The plot lines are well planned, the satires are clear and consistent in tone, and they reach their targets; the targets in the play are many.

We open in a typical English country village--Pressan Ambo--where an annual ritual is being performed. Ten years previously, to the day, Sir Francis Crewe, heir to all the lands on which Pressan and its neighbouring villages stand, after a quarrel with the last squire, his father, disappeared. The baronet himself had died eight years earlier, and it was a clause in his Will that each of his villages in turn, once a year on the anniversary of the heir's disappearance, should select one of their young men to roam the world in search of Francis. The





choosing is done at a formal lottery in which all the villagers participate, and this we witness in the first scene of the play. Pressan selects Alan Norman, the typically young, artless, and innocent British countryman to carry the colours for the coming year. Alan's search becomes the main plot thread of the play. It is thickened in various ways: additional incentive for Alan, for example, is the promise that if he is successful in his quest he wins the hand of the fair Iris, Francis' beautiful sister. The dog of the play's title is also introduced in the first scene--a strange animal who, in his disconcertingly undoglike independence, has been an object both of fascination and exasperation to the villagers for some time past. The dog chooses to accompany Alan on his quest, Alan christens him "Francis" for luck, and the two thereafter are constant companions for the remainder of the play.

This, in broad outline, is what happens in the opening scene. It remains to say something about the tone and technique in which this material is presented--the really significant part of the presentation as far as the authors' intention is concerned. The revue style, first of all, mainly successful as a style in *The Dance of Death*, is sharpened up and re-used for *The Dog Beneath the Skin*. But we have a much more conventional dramatic framework here, so that the style comes out somewhat resembling the operetta--viz., the very opening of the play:

[The garden of the Vicarage at Pressan Ambo. The scene suggests the setting of a pre-war musical comedy. The stage is crowded with villagers of all classes, who promenade to the strains of a distant band. The characters, as they pass in turn along the footlights, address the audience.]  
Vicar.

Here come I, the Vicar good  
Of Pressan Ambo, it's understood;  
Within this parish border  
I labour to expound the truth  
To train the tender plant of Youth  
And guard the moral order.



Chorus.       With troupes of scouts for village louts  
                  And preaching zest he does his best  
                  To guard the moral order.<sup>3</sup>

Probable influences in a setting such as this would be from three obvious quarters at least: Gilbert and Sullivan very strongly, the expressionists (use of the medium) in the direct address of the characters to the audience, and, to a lesser extent, Brecht as well. The function of the chorus, which occupies a most important role in this play, should also be explained. Whereas in The Dance of Death the individual chorus members were direct participants in the action of the play--indeed they were almost the only active "characters" it had--in Dog the chorus' primary function is that of commentator on the action rather than participant in it. Detached as it is then from the action itself, the chorus' very frequent comments are employed to an extremely important end. The chorus interprets, it expounds, and it comments thematically on the stage action. I have tried to indicate that Dog, which in the discussion up to now might appear as pretty light stuff (as on one level it is), has a profound and serious side as well. It is not a side which has been detected frequently by critics, but it is certainly there. It is the function of the chorus to keep up the audience's awareness of the basic seriousness--beneath the farce--of what they are seeing. Thus, all of the important pronouncements by the chorus (some of them exceeding one hundred lines in length) are serious in tone--and effectively serious--balancing the satiric-farce tone of the main plot when they interrupt it.

Space does not permit lengthy quotations from the chorus' speeches to illustrate my point here, but it will be noted as we proceed that most of the key statements of theme that I cite throughout this discussion







will be taken from the chorus' lines at different points in the play.

One of the longest of these speeches, for example, is one which precedes the opening of the play proper--something in the manner of the Announcer as the interpreting voice that we saw in The Dance of Death, although much more seriously offered in Dog. This particular recitation is both atmosphere builder and thematic statement, and it is markedly serious in manner when compared to what we had above:

The Summer holds: upon its glittering lake  
Lie Europe and the islands; many rivers  
Wrinkling its surface like a ploughman's palm.  
Under the bellies of the grazing horses  
On the far side of posts and bridges  
The vigorous shadows dwindle; nothing wavers.

. . . . .  
We would show you at first an English village: You shall  
choose its location

Wherever your heart directs you most longingly to look;  
you are loving towards it:

. . . . .  
Wherever you were a child or had your first affair  
There it stands amidst your darling scenery:  
A parish bounded by the wreckers' cliff; or meadows  
where browse the Shorthorn and the maplike Frisian. (11)

In contrast, the action of the play itself, however, continues in the same tone of near burlesque established in the opening lines. Applied specifically to Britain now is the satiric indictment of society that we have seen shaped and treated in Auden's first two plays. Once again Auden goes back for his method to dramatic expressionism. Most of the characters in the play are conceived clearly as types rather than as individuals. All of the types of the British social structure--at the village level, the basic level--are included in the satire and the basic theme is concentrated on defining British mentality in several of its aspects. The picture is not entirely a negative one, as I shall discuss



later, but the over-all impression which this scene creates is of a society governed fundamentally by a philosophy of thinly veiled fascism under the mask of patriotism. The intellectual menace, for example, conveyed in the vicar's avowal of his duty to "guard the moral order," is a part of the satire; we are intended to appreciate his utter unfitness for any such job. Those who come on stage after him continue to parade other facets of the same neo-fascist neurosis that dominates British life:

General.	General Hotham is my name. At Tatra Lakes I won my fame, I took the Spanish Lion. In Pressan now my home I've made And rule my house like a brigade With discipline of iron.
Chorus.	Side by side his peacocks stride: He rules them all at Conyers Hall With discipline of iron.
General's Wife.	Woman, though weak, must do her part And I who keep the General's heart Know well our island story And do my utmost to advance In India, Russia, Finland, France, The just and English glory.
Chorus.	With subtle wile and female smile, With speech and vote she will promote The just and English glory. (17-18)

As I said above, it is not a completely negative picture, of course. It is characteristic of Auden throughout his youthful period that though he must condemn his country for many important failings, the condemnation is offered with no little regret. The idea of Britain itself, its loved landscape that we have seen tenderly touched on in the opening chorus, is something still quite positive for Auden. And some of the qualities of British youth as well--its innocence, its good intentions, its belief in fair play--are parts of the British mystique with which





Auden could still profoundly identify. Thus, his young hero, Alan Norman, is noticeably less of a pure satiric creation than are most of Dog's other characters. Beneath the farce, there is underlying admiration for such qualities as the straightforward innocence he displays (General: "Don't disgrace Pressan Ambo, my boy... ." Alan: "Rather not, sir! Thanks awfully, sir!") it becomes indeed a powerful weapon (albeit a laughably unconscious one) against sophisticated hypocrisy and pretence. Though he does not pursue the question at any great depth in this play, Auden was strongly preoccupied with some of the implications of this division of loyalties he felt; the problem is studied at length in his next play, The Ascent of F6, in which the portrayal of the hero, Michael Ransom, is largely an extended study of a man caught in precisely this intellectual trap--that of being British.

One further point on the question of technique in Dog I might bring up also at this time. It will be noted that Auden uses names--Pressan Ambo, General Hotham, Iris Crewe, Alan Norman, etc.--for the type locale and the type characters of Dog. This is done not merely for the sake of caprice nor is it just a case of making use of the emblematic significance of the names. It is, rather, a precisely calculated shift from the conventions of expressionism to those of Realism/Naturalism and it has behind it an important thematic purpose. Names are an individualizing device (in Kaiser, for example, Alan would be "the Boy," or "the Innocent;" Pressan Ambo would be "the Village") and it is vital to the meaning of the play that up to a point the audience accept its characters and setting as real and individual. It is later, in the light of this acceptance, when a brilliantly absurd naiveté displayed by our typical



Englishmen of the play-world is shown to parallel a different but equally absurd naiveté in the real Britain, that the main didactic point of the play is made, in the analogy that is established between them. The proof of this point, of course, lies in the consideration of the remainder of the play, to which I might now move on.

Alan and his doggy companion depart at this point, meanwhile, in pursuit of the missing heir. At every shift of location from this point on in the play a seriously intoned between-scenes oration by the chorus accompanies the shift, to maintain effectively at all times in the auditor's mind the idea of a serious underlying theme. It is a part also of the playwrights' method that a familiarly psychological slant in their indictment of society becomes more and more pronounced in these choruses as the play proceeds; it shows up in the first chorus as Alan and "Francis" leave England:

Our sex and our sorrow are ever about us, like the  
 sultriness of a summer  
 As about our hero on his human journey,  
 Crossing a channel: on sea in steamer  
 For Ostnia and Westland, in post-war Europe. (33)

Everything in this play is skilfully cumulative in its effect; these choruses are one part of the technique: another is the nature of the wild adventures in which Alan and his dog begin now to become embroiled. Again, space does not permit a full rehearsal of all the hilarious details of what befalls them in the course of their strange quest, but I can touch on a few highlights.

Their first venture into inspired lunacy is on shipboard, crossing the channel enroute to "Ostnia" (Ostnia is a typical decadent European monarchy of the mid-1930's). While Francis becomes roaring drunk (and





subsequently violently and very humanly ill), lapping neat double whiskies from a bowl, Alan pursues his enquiries as to Francis' (the heir's) possible whereabouts. Deadpan innocence, carried on at a ludicrously naturalistic level (considering the context), is always the quality that is stressed in Alan. His first run-in is with a couple of brilliantly conceived cliché journalists, who later become Alan's companions in his quest. A sample of the text at this point:

Alan. to [Barman]. . . I thought of beginning my search [in Ostnia]. I didn't know where to start, so I just shut my eyes and put my finger on the map.

Barman. And a very good idea too, sir. Your health, sir. [They touch glasses. The Dog lifts up the bowl in its paws and touches Alan's glass. They all drink.]

1st J. [unobserved by Alan] What do you make of him?

2nd J. Queer sort of card. Might be a munitions agent.

1st J. Doubt it. I know most of them by sight.

2nd J. Or in the dope traffic.

1st J. Hasn't got a scarab ring.

2nd J. A white slaver?

1st J. They generally wear spats.

2nd J. Secret Service, maybe.

1st J. With that tie? Not on your life! (38)

The comic verse in Dog has the virtue, unique in Auden's plays, of never flagging in either inspiration or intensity; the songs are uniformly witty and pointed. One in this scene, sung by the two journalists is typical: their subject is "the racket," and everyone--including Alan ("You can keep that blue-eyed stuff for the others")--is a part of it:

If Chanel gowns have a train this year,  
 If Morris cars fit a self-changing gear,  
 If Lord Peter Whimsey  
 Misses an obvious clue,  
 If Wallace Beery  
 Should act a fairy  
 And Chaplin the wandering Jew;  
 The reason is  
 Just simply this:  
 They're in the racket, too! (41)



From this point on, succeeding episodes effectively increase the tempo of the satiric fun. Alan and his companions go on to Ostnia and an interview with the decadent king and his flunkies. They have the good fortune of being present for the final mopping up of the kingdom's latest revolt; the finishing touches of its suppression are supplied by the king himself, who personally conducts the ritual execution of the four revolutionary ringleaders (with his special gold revolver for the purpose). Their search takes them next, in another hilarious yet merciless satiric thrust through the façade of bourgeois morality, to Ostnia's Red-Light District. Here again the shift of place is accompanied by an ominous choric interlude in which the by now expected Freudian emphasis is put on the district's activities. And their visit there, pursued and haunted by all the district's sordid denizens--prostitutes, perverts, and dope addicts (among whom Alan stumbles on one of his lost predecessors in the quest for Francis)--further heightens our awareness of this fundamental madness at the core of our world.

The next episode, finally, is a really memorable climax to the mounting crescendo of humourously powerful satire on the madness of modern Europe. It takes place, fittingly, in a lunatic asylum in "Westland"--Westland being another "type" of European state of the day, this one on the fascist model: it is patterned on Hitler's Germany, even down to the use of Nazi racial jargon. Alan is the victim somehow of a collusion between Ostnian and Westlander border authorities. He is kidnapped into the asylum, his relative sanity in a world of loonies presumably qualifying him, by their standards, for committal. Skilfully contrived nonsense once again gives effective emphasis to the theme:





[Enter Two Medical Officers with Alan in a strait-waistcoat, in a wheeled chair.]

1st M.O. The Ostnia Frontier wasn't it? They've sent us several beauties.

2nd M.O. Yes.

1st M.O. What do they say?

2nd M.O. Travelling with a dog.

1st M.O. Hm. Canophilia.

1st M.O. States he is looking for someone he doesn't know.

2nd M.O. Phantasy Building. Go on.

1st M.O. Doesn't know the Westland Song.

2nd M.O. Amnesia. Pretty serious. [To Alan.] Now you. Have you ever been to the North Pole?

Alan. No.

1st M.O. Can you speak Chinese?

Alan. No!

2nd M.O. Do you dye your hair?

Alan. No!

1st M.O. Was your mother a negress?

Alan. No!!

2nd M.O. Do you drink your bathwater?

Alan. No!!!

1st M.O. Do you like my face?

Alan [losing his temper and yelling .] No!!!!

1st M.O. Just as I feared, A typical case of negativism.

. . . . .

2nd M.O. The gag, I think, don't you?

1st M.O. Yes, I think so. [They gag Alan.]

2nd M.O. Quite classic. He'll be an ornament to our collection. (66-67)

The pointed Nazi slant of the satire on Westland is very effectively handled as well. A portrait of Westland's uniformed "Leader" hangs on the asylum wall--complete except that he has a loudspeaker in lieu of a face; the "Leader" favours us with a typically inflammatory nationalistic diatribe, and we watch how his "Westland Loonies" snap through their hilarious paces ("Let us never forget that we are Westlanders first and madmen second!"). Though it becomes rather thin in this section (as elsewhere), the plot thread of the play never snaps, of course, completely, since the two journalists, led by Francis, have in the meantime tracked Alan to the asylum, where, by dint of some really heroically ludicrous maneuvers, they manage to free him. And the climax and ending of the



scene, is a vision of magnificent total disintegration (of all sense and reason) almost prophetic in its aptness, as the lunatics mount a great "airplane" they have been inspired by the Leader to build (out of their piled up beds and furniture) and soar off into infinite confusion:

1st. J. Company! Man the aeroplane! Fall out!

[The Lunatics rush to the structure of beds and scramble upon it. . .]  
1st Lunatic. Start her up! [The Lunatics imitate the roaring of the engines.]

1st L. Off we go! Faster! Faster! She's left the ground! We're rising! Higher! Higher!

[The Lunatics wave their handkerchiefs and grimace at the audience.]

A Mad Lady. Isn't the view gorgeous?

2nd Mad Lady. Look, there's the asylum. Just a tiny little speck!

A Mad Lady. I'll spit down the chimney! [Spits]

The Pilot. Hold on tight! I'm going to loop the loop!

[Shrieks of dismay. The Lunatics heave the beds up on end until the whole structure collapses. . . .]

Curtain (78-79)

Before moving on, one final comment on this scene relative to its effectiveness as political satire is perhaps apropos. One of the many reasons why Auden and Isherwood's last play, On the Frontier (in which a similar but serious look is taken at "Westland" politics) is a less enduring and successful work than Dog is that On the Frontier is dated by its seriousness. The intrinsically superior power of a humorous presentation of political satire (especially of Nazi politics) is apparent when one compares the two plays. Absurdity, it seems to me, without necessarily obscuring the very real (and still relevant) menace of what is being satirized, gives to the satire an effect of permanence or timelessness that ponderous seriousness, with On the Frontier as an example, can hardly achieve.

I will here leave off detailed discussion of the successive adventures of our heroes and return them as quickly as possible to





Pressan Ambo, to round out their absurd pilgrimage. Thematically, I think sufficient detail has already been gone into to establish fairly clearly the principal lines present in the play. The disintegration motif, introduced in the asylum episode, becomes probably the dominant image or motif (with the Freudian ~~séx~~-guilt implications becoming more and more overt) in Alan's and Francis' succeeding adventures. They have several more adventures before finally landing home: these include a run-in with "Grabstein," the "type" financier, as well as a long interlude in "Paradise Park," where they encounter, among other things, Grabstein's poet son living in blissful isolation (as he thinks) where nothing is real but his imagination--a not entirely facetious satire on the propensity of poets to evade reality. In Paradise Park also live a colony of psychosomatic invalids spending their lives in worship of their doctors and their diseases. All of these episodes are, of course, handled with the same kind of irrepressible humour and spirit that has characterized those scenes we have looked at up to now. Like the Westland episode, the confusion/disintegration motif climaxes the Paradise Park sequence as well. Alan has come on "Chimp Eagle," another of his predecessors in the Francis quest, dying of gunshot wounds (inflicted by strike-breaking police) and about to undergo the surgeon's knife in the Paradise Park hospital. Chimp has a message for Alan about Francis' whereabouts, and when he is wheeled away before he can communicate it, Alan and Francis rig the substitution of Francis for the anaesthetist's nurse to be sure not to lose him. The message, of course, is that Francis has been in England all the time. Chimp subsequently expires on the table due to a combination of unfortunate



circumstances--a riot at the boat club puts out the hospital's electricity in the middle of the operation and Francis (no nurse) mistakenly gives him an injection of hydrochloric acid that was supposed to be Adrenalin. The climax of the scene is suitably wild, when the surgeon attempts to chastise Francis for "her" clumsiness:

Surgeon. So you're the culprit, eh? Well, let me tell you, my good girl, if I ever see you in this theatre again, I'll . . .

[He becomes aware that he is staring into a Dog's face. There is an awful pause. The Surgeon makes some inarticulate sounds as if about to have a fit. The Dog utters a long-drawn howl. Then it turns and bolts for the door, its cap flying from its head. General dismay, confusion, screams, laughter, pursuit. Alan rushes out after the others.](110)

Back then in England they have a stop at the "Nineveh Hotel." A floor show in the Nineveh cabaret presents an extremely broad satire on cafe society and modern morals, as well as an interesting entertainment by one "Destructive Desmond," the tenor of whose act is to brutally rend and tear a "priceless Rembrandt" painting on stage--to the undisguised sadistic delight of his audience. This interlude raises again not only the disintegration motif, but also, and very prominently, its Freudian aspect, as the emphasis is laid both on the utter brutality of Mr. Desmond's performance and on the "groaning," obscene delight with which it is received by his audience.<sup>4</sup> In this section Alan also gets involved in an extremely Audenesque love affair--"Audenesque" in that his lover is a mannequin, the symbolic implication being, of course, once again one which we saw first in Paid on Both Sides, namely, that "love" as bandied around by modern man is really not love at all, but merely another disguise for pathological selfishness. When the mannequin, for example, is to speak, Alan rushes around behind it and speaks to himself in falsetto. Alan does recover from his aberration, however, when, following







his great night of love, he is presented with his exorbitant bill from the hotel and realizes that what he has been involved in is delusion. The actual depth of his delusion--about many things--is really only brought home to Alan though, and his quest is ended at the same time, when he is allowed to make the accidental discovery of Francis out of his skin. Yes, Francis his faithful dog, and Francis the missing heir are, and have always been, one and the same. For ten years, Francis explains to Alan, he has been living a masquerade--living like a dog. It was a joke at first, but as time passed he had become more and more used to, and more and more satisfied with, his underground life--so fascinating had been his view of the village from beneath that he could never bring himself to come back to dealing with it on the surface level. The shock of all this for Alan is phenomenal, as, naturally, it is going to be for the Vicar and his cohorts of Pressan Ambo. For the theatre audience, of course, and as I hope, for the reader of this thesis as well, it is preposterous. And its very preposterousness--its absurdity--is its dramatic power; for we understand now what Francis means, and also how his masquerade makes the real theme of the play explicit. The chorus preceding the final confused conclusion in Pressan Ambo states the moral. Two excerpts tell the story:

Beneath the communions and the coiffures: discover  
 your image.  
 Man divided always and restless always: afraid and  
 unable to forgive:  
 Unable to forgive his parents, or his first voluptuous  
 rectal sins,  
 Afraid of the clock, afraid of catching his neighbour's  
 cold, afraid of his own body,  
 Desperately anxious about his health and his  
 position: calling upon the Universe to justify his  
 existence,  
 . . . . .



You have wonderful hospitals and a few good schools:  
Repent.

The precision of your instruments and the skill of  
your designers is unparalleled:

Unite.

Your knowledge and your power are capable of infinite  
extension:

Act. (156-157)

The application, then, is to the England of Auden's day; and reform must begin with the mind, not with the body politic. The astonishment, of course, of the village, not only at the return of Francis, but at that even of Alan, is extreme. Not only extreme, but embarrassing. It is an unpropitious moment to attempt to introduce the idea of psychological honesty into British life: the Vicar and his fascist brigade of "The Lads of Pressan" are assembled for a military/nationalistic exhortation; and the engagement of Iris Crewe to a munitions manufacturer is being celebrated. The accusations of Francis and Alan are a scandal; the wanderers' return pleases almost no one. Francis' words hit too close to home:

You are units in an immense army: most of you will die without ever knowing what your leaders are really fighting for or even that you are fighting at all. Well, I am going to be a unit in the army of the other side: but the battlefield is so huge that it's practically certain you will never see me again. (174)

And as they leave Pressan Ambo again with their four pitiful converts to the good and honest life ("Traitors to your Pressan, General, not to ours!") the play closes with the two journalists soothing the ruffled villagers with the assurance that their scandal will never make the papers. The final image, though, is again the familiar one of confusion, when, a picture of the assembly being taken, the flash powder dissipates to reveal all of the villagers transformed into animals who mill, mooing and bawling, about the stage as the curtain falls.





I have spent perhaps longer than absolutely necessary on the discussion of The Dog Beneath the Skin mainly because of two elements which, in the context of this thesis, are worthy of stressing. First, though Dog is a neglected work today, there are elements in it--ideas, technique, and poetry, in combination--that are among the brightest achievements, in my opinion, of either author. Second, Dog's historical position in the English drama is an interesting one. Though largely derivative in technique, there are interesting originalities in its conception which carve it a unique niche in English drama. For this is Theatre of the Absurd with a vengeance. Perhaps sufficient notice of this fact has never before been taken. Monroe K. Spears, in his The Poetry of W. H. Auden, discusses Dog in terms of the metaphor of the title and mentions several possible symbolic interpretations of it--the "underdog" idea, the idea of man's animal qualities, and that "dog" is "god" spelled backwards--but he misses what to me is the main brilliance of the device. The brilliance is in the way it is handled naturalistically in the play. Francis, dressed up as a dog, cavorts around the stage throughout the play: he bites people, he gets drunk, he dresses up, he plays cards--all of this under the absurdly naive apparent pretence on the part of the authors that such a device can be carried off naturalistically. The only thing one can do is laugh. We have the General and the Vicar, for example, at the beginning:

Vicar. . . . . [Sees Dog.]  
 . . . . .  
 George, George! Good dog! Come here! Walk George, walk.  
 [He whistles. The Dog runs away.] That's queer!  
 [Everyone looks at the Dog, who walks round, snuffling and refusing advances.]



General. If you ask me, I shouldn't wonder if that dog wasn't sickening for the rabies. Most extraordinary animal I ever came across. . . . No loyalty; no proper feeling. Though I'm bound to say, while he was with me he was the best gun-dog I ever had. [To Dog.] Come here, sir. Heel, sir. Heel!! (28)

And at the end, when Francis mingles with the villagers (walking upright now and with the dog's head thrown back over his shoulders like a monk's cowl) we have the same monumentally absurd pretence:

Little Girl [in crowd]. Oh, I'm awfully glad you're back: Dear old Doggy!

Francis. Thank you for those kind words.

[Shakes hands with her.]  
[Everybody now becomes aware of the dog's skin which Francis is wearing.  
There are murmurs of:]  
Just fancy! The Dog! He was the dog! etc etc. (172)

It scarcely needs pointing out that such technique is not naïveté at all. It is, on the contrary, the basic imaginative brilliance of the play, for in it is established the analogy between the play world and the real world which is Dog's whole didactic point. The incongruity, the grotesqueness of the device is intended to epitomize precisely the same incongruity in the real world--the incongruity of man, hiding his real self under these outward skins (masks, disguises), and pretending that nothing is the matter. The Dog Beneath the Skin is, in its outrageous plot device, in its exploration and awareness of modern man, and in its brilliant humour, as powerful an example of Theatre of the Absurd as almost anything that has been written in the genre since. Beckett's garbage cans as much as Ionesco's rhinoceroses are thematically anticipated --twenty years earlier--in Auden and Isherwood's dog.

A much more ambitious attempt, this time at serious and with certain reservations essentially conventional drama, is Auden and Isherwood's next play, their "tragedy," The Ascent of F6. The key word here is







perhaps the word "conventional" for it describes the most important change both in technique and ideas that distinguishes Ascent from the plays which have preceded it. Basically, what Ascent attempts to do is to adapt the theme of The Dog Beneath the Skin to an individual rather than a general situation. "Realism" then, to the extent that the central character at least is meant to be an individual, real human being rather than a fantasy/farce character or an expressionistic "type," is the great difference between Ascent and Dog. I qualify the possible realism of the play very strongly, however, because there remains much in it which is far removed from the conventional realistic school (indeed, Ascent's technique of assimilation of non-realistic elements into its realistic theme is one of the play's most interesting features, and one which will be discussed at some length below), but it is certainly a long remove from Dog in this direction. Whether fully carried out, of course, or not, the mere adoption of the convention obliges many, and very great, changes in technique and approach in this play, and this is really the important thing about Ascent's realism. Logic in motivation and as a basis for action, for example, essentially irrelevant to the kind of a play The Dog Beneath the Skin is, is obviously no longer irrelevant, but basic in Ascent. Humour too is another device on which the realistic convention imposes some restraints. And such necessities have affected to a very great extent the kind of play The Ascent of F6 is.

The play's plot, first of all, centres around the struggles of one man to find himself--an Englishman--Michael Ransom. Ransom is conceived as a thinking member of that society which has been satirized in the other plays. The fact that he is a thinker, a man of heroic stature, is



important to the thesis of the play, for it enables him to understand (and his authors to delineate and define), intellectually, the struggle in which he is engaged--the trap, in other words, in which he is caught. His struggle is to understand his own nature and the forces which shape it and act upon it; his trap is that nature. The whole plot is structured around Ransom's struggle. It consists, in brief, of the following:

For sordid reasons of state--basically to gain a psychological triumph in the minds of the superstitious natives--a mountain in a remote British colony must be climbed. There are two adjoining colonies, one controlled by Ostnia, the other by England, known as Ostnian and British Sudoland, on whose common border the mountain--F6--stands. It is a question of politics that British climbers must gain the top before the Ostnians, who are planning an ascent, do. The natives are said to believe that whoever gains the summit first will rule all Sudoland for one thousand years and it is therefore vital to stability in the colony (stability for British interests) that Britain win the race. A further part also of the superstition the natives of Sudoland hold about F6 (and the legend's really important aspect in terms of the theme of the play) is that the mountain is haunted by a demon--a vaguely menacing spirit who dwells at its summit. Michael Ransom, a solitary, thinking man, supposedly remote from (and with abhorrence for) the sordid machinations of international political maneuvering, is the only possibility Britain might have of succeeding. The issue of the first act is whether Ransom can be talked into undertaking the climb. At first, he cannot--Britain's colonial administrator, a suave diplomatic type, is Ransom's brother James. For James, Michael refuses. But, and here we move into our





familiar theme, for his mother, he capitulates and undertakes it. He elects, in other words, under pressure from his mother, to place himself on the side of immorality, with the politicians, and to betray his own conscious desire to live an honest, an individual, and an essentially unselfish life.

Ransom's capitulation at this point becomes then his ultimate downfall and the crux of the action of the play. Ransom is not sure what his motives in making the ascent are, but, with his party, he ascends E6, and we follow him. There are, thus, two ascents: the literal ascent of the mountain, and the concomitant ascent into self-knowledge; we approach the summit and the knowledge together as the play proceeds, coming to both in the final scene, in which the nature of the demon--Ransom's particular demon--is revealed: his mother. This is the plot of the play, and it is, in its basic conception, a realistic one, however symbolic its overtones. Thematically, it is also pretty well old hat for Auden. I might stress also at this point that there remain great difficulties with this play, of which my plot outline conveys really no idea. In conception probably the boldest and most ingenious of all the Auden/Isherwood dramas, Ascent is marred in its execution by obscurities and carelessnesses of various kinds which render it ultimately perhaps the weakest of the three major works. The several aspects of these problems I shall take up in detail later, but before getting into detailed discussion of implications in Ascent I will once again say something first about technique. Many of the techniques of this play are new--chiefly a result of the tension of adjusting the realistic plot to its mythic theme--and most of them are both novel and interesting.



The use of verse in The Ascent of F6 first of all, is somewhat different, structurally, from its use in The Dog Beneath the Skin. Most of the play's dialogue is, in keeping with the realism of the surface plot, in a naturalistic style. Certain of the characters are, of course, as has been indicated, expressionistic types: mostly those characters associated with the politicians--James Ransom, the "type" diplomat; Lady Isabel Welwyn, the "type" colonial dame; Lord Stagmantle, the "type" press czar, and so on--but their style of speech is generally a naturalistic one. Their role as type characters is brought to life, then, through the patterning of this speech into the familiar clichés of their type, the use of which technique we have already seen much of in The Dog Beneath the Skin. As for many others of their techniques, here too the authors have gone back to classic German expressionism (Kaiser perhaps is the best example), where a relatively naturalistic dialogue form is the standard style except (and it is an important exception) for those moments of greatest intensity, where verse appears. It is the same thing (up to a point at least) in this play. In the plot sequence itself, verse appears just as it does in Kaiser, only for those moments of greatest emotional intensity. Its use thus implies a similar breaking through of the naturalistic surface into the realm of pure, essential, truth that I discussed in my first chapter as being the fundamental expressionist aim. Some form of chorus, of course, is always with us in Auden's plays, and because of these choruses the proportion of verse in an Auden play is generally greater than it is in the expressionists! The kind of chorus used in The Ascent of F6 is again, however, a new departure from Auden's previous practice and is an interesting stage innovation. It is





not, in fact, a "chorus" at all in the traditional sense, though it functions somewhat like a chorus. A small, isolated "box" area is set off at either side of the stage in which the choric-functioning characters appear at intervals throughout the play. Their function is a part, once again, of the mythic dimension of the play. While stage centre is occupied by the individual plot situation, the boxes at the sides represent the reflections of society as a whole on this central story. The political propagandists, for example, spread their particular distorted version of the stage centre events from one side of the stage, while the reaction of "Mr. and Mrs. A.;" the sadly typical British household, to this propaganda is then shown in the other side. It is an attempt, and an interesting one, fundamentally to broaden the dramatic base of the play--to bring more to bear on it than just the individual situation. Thus, mass communication media--the newspaper and the radio--are brought live into the play and their vast power over the Mrs. and Mrs. A's of society is emphasized. And for even stronger emphasis on this aspect of their theme the authors use another device from German expressionism--one that Erwin Piscator pioneered for his classic productions of Toller's plays in the 1920's<sup>5</sup>--the spotlight. The spotlight is used prominently by Auden and Isherwood in their choric interludes. Stage centre is left dark, while a spotlight is beamed on to the "Announcer" in a simulated radio broadcast in one side box, and on Mr. and Mrs. A. in their living room in the other. The spotlight technique is not confined here just to the choric interludes either. The confrontation scenes between Ransom and his mother, when verse (the medium once again of essential expression or pure truth) comes



into play--and with it the central mythic theme of the Oedipus complex--also use the same focussing technique. Everything else then present at the time on stage fades out of the picture while we concentrate more and more exclusively on the central pair.

These then are some of the borrowed techniques brought by Auden and Isherwood into their play. And there are others as well, probably the most important of which is their attempt at pure expressionism in Ascent's final scene. This is a dream sequence, or a dramatic projection of the dying vision of Ransom, which is patterned directly on the original of Strindberg. I can probably most effectively discuss this scene, however, by taking it in its context as a part of a somewhat more detailed discussion of the play as a whole.

The Ascent of F6 actually is, first of all, considerably more complex in its implications than the brief outline given above might suggest. It is rather like Paid on Both Sides in this respect, in that what is superficially uncomplicated, upon analysis is found to involve considerable thematic profundity. In another respect too (and here a pejorative one) Ascent resembles Paid, in that much of this real profundity is so buried in textual obscurities that its real significance seems often almost inaccessible. This obscurity, in fact, together with the extremely uneven quality of its poetry, are the major factors undermining both its effectiveness as drama and ultimately its value as literature.

Michael Ransom, then, is the central figure; the conflict is his conflict--with his brother, with his mother, with F6, with imperialism, with the world, and with himself. The basis of the conflict, its keynote, is struck in Ransom's opening soliloquy:





Virtue and Knowledge! One can picture Ulysses' audience: a crook speaking to crooks. . . . It was not Virtue those lips, which involuntary privation had made so bitter, could pray for; it was not Knowledge; it was Power. . . . Friends whom the world honors shall lament their eternal losses in the profoundest of crevasses, while he on the green mountains converses gently with his unapproachable love.<sup>6</sup>

He is saying in effect that virtue and knowledge, as man is capable of conceiving them, are unreal--at the root they are but a means to power, though blind idealism may be incapable of grasping this truth. Idealism thinks to converse gently on the green mountains while the "Friends whom the world honors" lament, seeing now their folly to which the world remains blind. Ransom despairs for himself and mankind:

. . . the web of guilt that prisons every upright person and all those thousands of thoughtless jailers from whom Life pants to be delivered--myself not least; all swept and driven by the possessive incompetent fury and the disbelief. (15)

We have here, of course, once again nothing more than another reiteration of the old familiar theme--the self-imprisonment of society in its own subconscious guilt--the theme that, as we have seen, is at the heart of every Auden play. The only difference in Ascent from the previous works, though, is that the theme is now explicit, direct, and central to the plot and action of the play itself, no longer only an underlying indictment. The remainder of the drama works toward bringing this theme to life and bringing it home.

Choris interludes alternate with the main plot development. In the second scene Mr. and Mrs. A picture for us the foundations of enlightened British society:

. . . A slick and unctuous Time  
Has sold us yet another shop-soiled day,  
. . . . .  
I have dusted the six small rooms:  
. . . . .  
We are lost. We are lost. (16)



These are our faceless "average" millions; expendable pawns in the game of Power. It is for their sake that Ransom despairs.

Give us something to live for. We have waited too long. (18)

Their "something to live for," and the frame of the dramatic action, is cast in the next scene. The symbols of British imperialism, Lady Isabel Welwyn, colonial dame; Lord Stagmantle, press czar; General Dellaby-Couch, old-school army administrator; and James Ransom, suave diplomat--together hatch the fate of Sudoland, of Michael Ransom, and though they do not know it, of themselves.

We switch next to a public house in the lake district. Michael Ransom is there, together with his party; there are strange extremes of temperament represented among them, and Ransom is something like their god. James Ransom and his cronies come to press their case on Michael. James now becomes the link that connects the general (or symbolic) to the individual plot. The antipathy between the brothers is sharply etched. Ransom's harsh, "Why have you come here? What do you want?", is a startling change from our image just formed of him as one whose self-control it would seem an earthquake could not shake. Is it not the power of his personality alone which holds together the almost totally divergent elements of his group? What, then, is there in his brother that can so arouse him? His principles, certainly, are loathsome to Michael; that he is inferior, a parasite, equally so--but this could hardly be enough. And then he reveals it to his mother--that in spite of worth, in spite of all, he was always shut out of her love, which went all to James. The mother's reply is climactic because it opens Ransom's eyes for the first time in his life to the truth of his position as a man. James, he finds







out, is a shell, and by symbolic extension, so is imperialism--unsupported, neither could stand an hour. It is Michael's moment of insight; if he could break out now, refuse to join the bandwagon to destruction, and free himself from the inheritance of distorted values and the cycle of guilt to which each successive generation of men continues to bind itself, then salvation is open for him. And tragedy, inevitable doom is in his capitulation.

Up to this point in the play, then, there are no particular difficulties with meanings. The tone of latent tragedy, except for some small lapses, has also been relatively well sustained. The basic difficulty that Auden has in making the remainder of his play completely coherent is that he tries to load it with too much meaning. In keeping with the somewhat messianic propensity that Auden (and Isherwood later as well) has displayed in his previous plays, Ascent, too, is naturally to be made a platform for spreading of the same messianic gospel; that is, Ransom's wish that life be eventually delivered from its "thousands of thoughtless jailers" must be vindicated--and prominently so--even though he himself goes down to defeat. It is chiefly through the attempt to embody both of these aims concurrently in the play that our authors run into trouble. Thus, at one level, what James Ransom stands for is matched against what Michael stands for: the chauvinism and political opportunism that characterize the modern state are matched against the selfless sincerity in a cause which will characterize the new regime. James, therefore, and all he stands for must be shown to be defeated. Michael himself, however, his basic altruism and positive impulses still hampered by the psychological inheritance that binds him, cannot have a



complete triumph either. This, at least, is the way I understand the resolution of Act II of the play. Michael's fundamentally positive goals are those which will eventually prevail but at this stage in history they are not yet sufficiently strong to do so.

Though I believe that, seen from this standpoint, the play, and especially its final climactic scene, can be understood, it is nonetheless a serious indictment of the play generally that a large measure of ambiguity on these points remains.

Mr. and Mrs. A, of course, follow with great momentary enthusiasm the progress of the Ransom party.

Mr. A.      Cut out the photos and pin them to the wall,  
               Cut out the map and follow the details of it all,  
               Follow the progress of this mountain mission,  
               Day by day let it inspire our lowly condition.

Mrs. A.    Many have come to us often with their  
               conscious charms,  
               They stood upon platforms and madly waved  
               their arms,  
               At the top of their voices they promised  
               all we lack,  
               They offered us glory but they wanted it  
               back.

Mr. A.      But these are prepared to risk their lives  
               in action  
               In which the peril is their only satisfac-  
               tion.  
               They have not asked us to alter our lives  
               Or to eat less meat or to be more kind to  
               our wives. (40-41)

It looks, thus, like a possible glimpse of light on a dark political horizon. Michael himself shares something of their feeling. There is a long and somewhat obscure scene here which involves a crystal ball and a long conversation Ransom holds with the Abbot of the Sudoland glacier monastery on the slopes of E6, just prior to their ascent. An attempt is made here (none too successfully) to sort out some of the conflicting





thematic threads that have appeared so far in the play. The whole business of the monastery is straight out of Hilton's Lost Horizon, and theatrically it is probably quite effective material. Hooded and spectral presences float back and forth; mystery and tension mount on stage. The Abbot is one who, as it were, has solved the mystery of life, and it is through him that Ransom makes his final complete discovery of self. Ransom has seen, in a crystal ball which the Abbot tells him shows men only "a fragment of their nature," an appeal from the down-trodden of the world that he should be their saviour. He questions whether his real motives are so pure. They are not, says the Abbot, he should stay in the monastery and abdicate completely his human will, for in this only lies salvation. All exercise of power or desire is corruption, and thus, symbolically, the demon of the mountain, which is each man's personal impulse to willful action, is real.<sup>7</sup> The climb, then, which Ransom is powerless to resist making anyway--partly because of external pressures (his previous commitment) but fundamentally because of pride--is capitulation and destruction for him, as he himself recognizes:

Ransom. Very well then, since you wish it. I obey you. The summit will be reached, the Ostnians defeated, the Empire saved. And I have failed. We start at dawn. . . (62)

One by one, then, inexorably as the ascent progresses, each of the five members of Ransom's climbing crew falls. Each is a victim, as Ransom sees it, of his pride; and pride and will-power alone are left at the end to carry him up the last steps to the summit. His death there is the setting for the final, expressionistic section of the play. This is a dream scene on the Strindberg model and though, as mentioned earlier, it offers various difficulties of interpretation, in its central



idea it shows considerable imagination, as an attempted living projection of the mind of a man disturbed and haunted by figures from his past. This is the basic idea which must be kept in mind if the scene is to be viewed in perspective. Thus, much of what passes in the scene is not intended to be significant per se--but only through its relevance as a totality to the mind of Ransom.

The stage is set with the draped figure of the demon sitting motionless on the summit of the mountain. In the presence of the demon the scene involves two sequences of action: firstly, a contest between James and Michael Ransom (which Michael wins), and secondly, the trial and condemnation of Michael Ransom for his overcoming of James. In each sequence, the demon is a key figure, and since the demon is Ransom's mother, the Freudian theme becomes in the final analysis the central issue of the play. A chess game with real men as the pieces is the symbolic form that James' and Michael's contest for supremacy before the demon takes. On James' side are his political cronies, on Michael's side his climbing crew. The defeat of James (decreed by the mother figure) brings to a close the political chapter of the conflict. The implication is intentional here (since the final lines of the chorus return to it) that, with James, all he stands for--imperialism, chauvinism, exploitation--is to go down to defeat. The remainder of the scene, then, shifts to the personal plane, as the monastery Abbot appears to judge Michael for what he has done in wishfully causing the death of his brother. Thus, the Abbot is a sort of a manifestation of the principle of conscience in Ransom's mind; ultimately it is Ransom judging himself. And in the same way as the Abbot--the one who had awakened Ransom's







conscience--appears again in the dream to call him to account for his actions, the other members of his climbing crew, now dead, likewise return to taunt him with his failure on their behalf. And Ransom's death, then, as the echoes of all his accusers are buried finally and climactically in an avalanche plunging down from the summit of F6, is (like all the defeats of the Auden plays) ultimately self-inflicted. The unmasking of the demon at this point symbolizes the penetration of the deepest level of Ransom's psyche; the demon is revealed as a youthful Mrs. Ransom (symbolizing Ransom's total reversion to infancy), and she speaks a fairy-tale elegy over the shattered psyche of her son. A final choric oration then rounds out the theme on both the personal and universal levels to complete the play:

Free now from indignation  
 Immune from all frustration  
 He lies in death alone;  
 Now he with secret terror  
 And every minor error  
 Has also made Man's weakness known.

Whom history has deserted,  
 These have their power exerted,  
 In one convulsive throe;  
 With sudden drowning suction  
 Drew him to his destruction.  
 [Cresc.] But they to dissolution go. (97)

As I have indicated, the final achievement of this play is a mixture of satisfying and dissatisfying elements. Basically, both themes and the construction are well thought out, but there are great weaknesses in the presentation. I have mentioned the obscurities that cloud many of the key scenes in the play, and that weaken its dramatic effect, and the real difficulty is largely a question of over-subtlety. Erudite and esoteric themes (Freudian psychology, Kierkegaardian philosophy) would be



effective in a static presentation over which one could sit and reflect, but they are too subtle for drama. And the same criticism could be applied to poetic technique. In every Auden play, as we have seen, poetry appears extensively, and is extremely important as a thematic device. The choruses, for example, which are wholly static poetry and essentially divorced from the central action in both Ascent and Dog, are absolutely vital to the understanding of the plays. But Auden has difficulty in the writing of dramatic poetry, for whatever else he may be as a poet he is not a poet of what I might call "dramatic clarity." Characteristically, Auden's poetry must be studied to be appreciated, and in a play one does not have time for this kind of reflection. Also, his poetry is rarely simple, and it is not Auden's talent to explain for his readers what he is doing. These are the drawbacks which largely defeat his poetic purpose: in Ascent. Certain passages we are never sure exactly how to interpret. If we look at the mother's speeches, for example, we find that they are largely doggerel--kindergarten rope-skipping rhyme and nothing more, viz:

When the wine gets into your head  
 Mother will see that you're not misled;  
 A saint am I and a saint are you  
 Its perfectly, perfectly, perfectly true. (44)

The obvious question is, why? Is this mere carelessness on the writers' part or is it intentional? I have concluded after considerable reflection that it is intentional, and that it is put there as a part of the infant reversion motif: she speaks to Ransom as though he were a baby. From this standpoint, then, the style fits, but at the same time its use rather defeats the poetic purpose in another direction, for the





effect of the appearance of this kind of doggerel--at those moments of supposedly extreme dramatic force in the play, when intensity of expression should be at its highest--rather than to increase dramatic intensity, is to reduce it to absolute zero. The style thus becomes a great hindrance to the play's tragic ambitions.

If The Ascent of F6 must be judged ultimately as an experiment in dramatic structure of intriguing possibilities but which miscarries partly because of its very intricacy, then On The Frontier, Auden and Isherwood's final play, represents their determined attempt not to repeat the excesses which contribute to Ascent's failure. The last play, as a result, is the most conventional of all their dramas, and correspondingly (and unfortunately) as well, by far the least imaginative. Except for one important and interesting innovation in Auden's "philosophy" (harking back to the new "synthesis" of which I spoke in the Freud/Marx analogy of The Dance of Death), there is little in the play of enduring dramatic value or interest. In their efforts to avoid the mists of erudition and over-subtlety that so cloud Ascent, in On the Frontier they have avoided as well almost every trace of originality, and Monroe K. Spears is correct, generally, in dismissing the play as "indistinguishable from . . . dozens of other anti-war and anti-fascism works." As a causative factor, indeed, of Auden and Isherwood's retirement from the dramatic lists (both in their early thirties) after On the Frontier, the play's very conventionality and lack of originality could well have been important.

One thing at least can be honestly conceded this play, and perhaps it should not be overlooked: there is a degree of controlled competence in the area of stage technique displayed here which is far in advance



of anything Auden and Isherwood have shown us heretofore. A coherent and well organized plan, steady and even plot movement, logical motivation, and a new sense of theatre generally, combine to make On the Frontier distinctly superior in one sense to all of Auden's previous dramatic efforts. The fly in the ointment, however, is that the material that is on this occasion so well handled is, ultimately, scarcely worth the effort.

The highly topical nature of the material and its handling is a further distinguishing feature of On the Frontier as compared to the previous plays, and the date of its appearance (1938) marks probably the high point in Auden's career of direct concern with politics. The subject matter of On the Frontier shows once again, of course, the strong, and immediately contemporaneous influence of Brecht and Toller, both of whom had recently published essentially naturalistic plays along the same lines.<sup>8</sup> The interpretation given the material here, however, does have its characteristic and peculiar Audenesque twist. As handled by Auden and Isherwood, in fact, these up-to-the-minute issues are transformed essentially into an updated version of Paid on Both Sides; Paid's feud, with all the same implications, is transferred to modern Europe. There is even important use made in On the Frontier (about the only expressionistic technique to appear in it) of a stage device that appeared first in Paid--that of dividing the stage expressionistically between two warring factions.

A partial measure of the new organizational skill displayed in On the Frontier is the way in which matters of form and technique lend themselves neatly to a compartmentalized approach for critical discussion. Two distinct, straightforward, and essentially separate sections comprise







the plot of the play. Three significant stage techniques require to be discussed.

One "style" or technique is used for each of the two plot segments, and the third device, a series of Brechtian "Interludes," bridges the gap between them. Each plot element in addition concentrates its significance on a different level: these are the usual two levels of an Auden play, the mythic and the political.

The structural centre of the play, which embraces both sides of its divided plot, is found in the rivalry and subsequent embroilment of our two "type" European states, Ostnia and Westland. Ostnia, it will be remembered, is the decadent monarchy of The Dog Beneath the Skin, and Westland the psychologically disturbed National Socialist dictatorship of the same play. The political side of On the Frontier is developed primarily through the serious presentation of the inner workings of the Westland state at its highest level; it is patterned with great care, (although with considerable licence, of course) directly on the model of Nazi Germany. Thus, we are presented with the authors' diagnosis of this state and its governing circles--economic, political, psychological--the basic propagandistic aim being the displaying of the shaky foundations on which such a state is built. The style here is straight naturalism, and propaganda is at its most tedious in this section. Two central characters dominate the action in this side of the play; the highly neurotic "Leader" of Westland (substitute "Hitler"), and his highly talented, utterly amoral, and totally power-oriented manipulator "Valerian," the head of the "Valerian Trust" (substitute perhaps "Krupp") and the real power of the state (to the extent at least that power in a state is a rational



matter, to establish the negative of which is actually one of the main purposes of the play). The other half of the plot operates, then, parallel to this, and it is a social plot, in which both states, their motivations, and their people are intended to be displayed. Here is introduced the expressionistic device of the divided stage, or the "Ostnia/Westland Room" as the stage directions call it. On stage are shown simultaneously the living rooms of a supposedly typical middle-class family of each of the two countries--the Vrodnys of Ostnia and the Thorvalds of Westland. As in Paid on Both Sides the implication both of this device and of this whole part of the play, as the dialogue and action unfold, is that the quarrel that divides the two sides and which degenerates eventually (and inexorably) into war and bloodshed, is one in which neither blame nor exoneration can be assigned to either side. Everything here, of course, is much clearer than it was in Paid, and vastly improved technical thinking is at the bottom of the new clarity. Some of the few really effective episodes the play presents, in fact, are those in which the inexorableness of the progress to war is stressed, along with the total apparent helplessness of the participants themselves to withstand the pressures that move them steadily toward it. It is an interesting technique, not new by any means to Auden and Isherwood, but, particularly in the topical context in which it is now applied, quite effective (at least propagandistically) as theatre. The centre of the stage, thus, is empty, and as the Thorvalds and the Vrodnys (each oblivious of the other family's simultaneous presence on stage) independently discuss their family concerns--in a technique of straightforward naturalism--concerns that range subjectively from petty family squabbles





to the most ominous of political misunderstandings and misconceptions, this empty stage stands more and more prominently forth before the spectator as the physical embodiment of the frontier of the title--that completely arbitrary and ultimately senseless line that divides nation from nation and man from man. The frontier's significance, thus, operates also on two levels: it is both physical and metaphysical barrier, and it is the central message of the play that on both levels the barrier can be breached only by love. Love is presented in this play, for the first time, as a positive hope for the future--the "synthesis" between life and death and the one fixed value in a world of flux and change. Symbolically, thus, love alone occupies stage centre in the play. The younger members of each of the two families, Eric Thorvald and Anna Vrodney (symbolizing the hope and need of love that each new generation is born with) without ever meeting in reality, grope toward each other again and again in the play, toward stage centre and the circle of light that shines there at moments, symbolizing the radiance of transforming love.

This, then, is in essence what On the Frontier consists of, and it remains for me to show, by a somewhat more detailed analysis of each part of the plot, why these potentially good ideas do not really jell with any great success as drama.

Before going on to this discussion, however, I will digress briefly to consider the third stage technique the play employs, the Brechtian interludes mentioned above. The following "table of contents" appears in the published version of On the Frontier preceding the text itself and is reproduced as illustration both of the structural cohesion of the whole play--in the dual-plot alternations and rigid observance of unities--and



of this third stylistic device.

TIME: THE PRESENT

ACT ONE: EARLY SUMMER

Prologue: At the gates of the Valerian Works  
Scene One: Valerian's Study.  
Interlude: A prison in Westland  
Scene Two: The Ostnia/Westland Room

ACT TWO: A WEEK LATER

Scene One: The Ostnia-Westland Room  
Interlude: A dance-hall in Westland  
Scene Two: Valerian's Study

ACT THREE: NINE MONTHS LATER

Scene One: The Ostnia/Westland Room  
Interlude: In the Westland Front Line  
Scene Two: Valerian's Study (a fortnight later)  
Interlude: The English Newspapers  
Scene Three: The Ostnia-Westland Room (107)

It can be seen that the interludes appear in the play with absolute regularity at every fall of the curtain. The interludes are, with one exception, musical and they are patterned directly on the classic Brechtian epic style of St. Joan of the Stockyards for example. They are presented, in On the Frontier, in front of the curtain while scenery changes are being made, and for the most part are just the stereotype socialist complaints against exploitation, against war, and against capitalism.

The "prisoners' lament" of Act I is perhaps typical:

First Prisoner. [sings].

Industrialists, bankers, in comfortable  
 chairs

Are saying: 'We still have control  
 of affairs.

The Leader will have all our enemies  
 shot.'

All. They would like to forget us, but, O,  
 they cannot!

Second Prisoner. The idle, the rich, and the shabby  
 genteel

And the clever who think that the  
 world isn't real

Say: 'The forces of order have  
 triumphed! We're safe!'





All.                    But the world has its own views on  
                          how to behave!

.....

All.                    The night may seem lonely, the night  
                          may seem long,  
                          But Time is patient and that's where  
                          they're wrong!  
                          For Truth shall flower and Error explode  
                          And the people be free then to choose  
                          their own road! (128-129)

Like the manner of these interludes, their function as well, needless to say, is also after Brecht; they are distancing or alienation devices designed to make the audience observe the play at all times critically rather than emotionally. I think it should also be apparent by now that there is a basic discrepancy between the tone of these interludes and that of the main plot itself. Whereas in the Thorvald/Vrodny section of the plot the primary aim is to demonstrate that war is fundamentally a state of mind and therefore inescapable, in the interludes, on the contrary, we have almost the classic Marxist position being stated. Only one of the interludes really comes close to conveying the same theme as the play. This is the "English Newspapers" interlude of Act III, which consists of a series of news clips on the Ostnia-Westland war covering all shades of political opinion, from extreme right to rabid left, and the unstated satiric point is that all are wrong in their interpretations.

This unresolved ambiguity between the interludes and the play itself, an ambiguity that starts out as one between politics and psychology but which terminates as an ambiguity between propaganda and art, is prominent as well in the "Valerian" sub-plot. Here indeed propaganda wins out over art. I have already shown the extent to which the model for this part of the plot is obviously taken from the actual existing conditions of the Nazi Germany of 1937, and it is probably mainly because of this



model that the play is a failure here. Neither Valerian nor the Leader surmounts his model to arrive at anything resembling subjective dramatic significance on his own. The style of the presentation, it might be added, does little to help in this aim. The naturalistic story line that is integrated with the propaganda--to create vitality and human interest--makes the presentation plausible but still does not turn it into successful art.

We are introduced first to Valerian, the mastermind, the man in complete control (who is also the absolutely uninspired composite of all the cliché socialist villains that propaganda has yet invented). In a conversation, then, with Lessep, his secretary, Valerian reveals both his knowledge that Lessep is in the pay of Ostnian Intelligence and tells us also that the armaments producers of both countries maintain a constant and comfortable collusion--a collusion that involves trading in military secrets as well as a completely cynical and utterly realistic view of the profit potential of nationalism. Valerian, indeed, with a little restraint and slightly more imagination, might have had interesting dramatic possibilities: he is the man totally without illusions:

. . .Yes, for the man of power, there can now be but one aim--absolute control of mankind. (118)

He is society's arch-villain, in other words, in the power-terms of the Ascent of F6. In a subsequent conversation which Valerian holds with Stahl, one of his directors, the conditions of Westland life and politics are also revealed; they are chaotic:

Stahl. . . .We're in for really big trouble. Conditions at the labour camps are getting worse all the time. The men are complaining quite openly: six months ago, they wouldn't have dared. The food isn't fit for an African village. The buildings leak--what can you expect from that Army contract stuff? T.B. is definitely on the increase. As for





the Shock Troops--if even fifty per cent of what I hear is true--the whole organization's rotten from top to bottom; and the commandants are responsible only to the Leader--which means to nobody at all, . . . At the barracks, you'll hear the same story: the Leader has broken every promise he ever made. The same thing down at the Works. Agitators have been getting at the men, secret unions are being formed. I even heard rumours of a stay-in strike. . . . (120)

The Leader himself, then, who next appears, is cut from the same stereotyped mould as Valerian. Originally an unemployed bank clerk, a talent for rhetoric has brought him to the dizzying pinnacle of leadership --leadership for which he is neither intellectually nor emotionally fitted, and which he retains at the sufferance of Valerian ("Valerian: . . . The leader. . . crying: 'Revolution' . . . obligingly ruined a number of our lesser competitors and business rivals. . . Without us, he could not exist for a fortnight."). He is the classic example of misguided, paranoiac ambition in a position of power:

Leader. It is my mission to restore to every Westlander the dignity of labour, to put good honest tools into his hands, to guard him from crafty, underhand foreign competition. Westland must awake! Westland must throw off her fetters! Westland must raise the heavy load of poverty from the shoulders of the groaning poor. (126-127)

This does not, indeed, tell the story of the plot, but it shows, I think sufficiently, the material of which the plot is made. That such hackneyed, mechanical, and utterly impoverished prose is not the stuff of enduring drama scarcely needs pointing out; and the mechanical superimposing of a naturalistic story line upon it is of little assistance. Such as the plot is, what it serves to do is to reinforce the other main thesis of the play, the war myth--the thesis that, given man's psychological condition, wars are inevitable and completely beyond rational control. Thus, in the Valerian scenes, tension mounts throughout as Westland and Ostnia jostle each other; neither side wants war--Valerian



derides even the possibility--but, seemingly spontaneously, mutual provocations and accusations continuously occur that, despite all efforts, bring disaster down on the heads of all. And the Valerian story ends on an almost ludicrously melodramatic note: one Grimm, a storm trooper, in a revolt that brings down the Leader, repays Valerian with a bullet for having ruined the small business of his father years before--keeping the anti-capitalist theme prominent in the plot down to its very end; and a further typical Auden twist has Valerian die with a taunt to Grimm on his lips about his attachment for his mother!

Though not so patently propagandistic in its implications as the Valerian plot, the Thorvald/Vrodny section is, in the final analysis, equally impermanent as serious drama. The dramatic failure here, as I said at the beginning, is primarily a result of the overriding emphasis accorded the mythic theme in this section at the expense of the character drama--just as in the Valerian plot the political overtones effectively overcome the artistic aim. Both the Vrodny family and the Thorvald family are one-dimensional creations of absolutely no dramatic depth. With a couple of minor exceptions, personal characteristics of individuals are almost completely indistinguishable. It is interesting, and a good measure of Auden and Isherwood's own obvious dissatisfaction with what I might call the dramatic "presence" of their characters, that before the play itself, in the published version, they set a brief descriptive note about the personal characteristics of each character. This is the only one of their plays in which such notes are used, and, though the use of such data is common in plays, the point is that in this instance the data are necessary, for from the play itself they could never be deduced. Mrs. Thorvald, for example, is described in the note as "Good-natured, a bit slatternly. Has been the butterfly type. Hates rows. Wears dressing-jackets, kimonos, arty clothes." Needless to say, in a success-







fully drawn character, the personal traits of this description would be expressed through the play, but in this case without such descriptive leads one would have very little to go on. There are four members in each of the two families and they are, as I say, virtually indistinguishable, both in their sentiments and in the words in which they utter them. Each family has a second-generation member, the would-be lovers, Anna and Eric, discussed above. Mrs. Vrodny, in lieu of a husband, has a father--Colonel Hussek, a "type" old-school army officer. She also has a ne'er-do-well brother, Oswald, who is one of the two characters in the Vrodny/Thorvald plot of slightly more than paper thinness. Oswald is in one sense a low-level counterpart to Valerian, but weaker. He has no ambition and he drinks, but he alone is realist enough to see that Westland, because it produces good whiskey, cannot be all bad. Oswald's only equal in dramatic depth in this section of the play is Martha Thorvald, the sister of Dr. Thorvald (head of the Thorvald family). She is unique among the characters in possessing considerable spirit. It is a violently repressed spirit, but when it breaks through it has power. It is in Martha Thorvald that the basic psychological foundation of the war theme (in exact parallel to Paid on Both Sides) is most forcefully shown in the play. Her intense passion finds its only outlet in violent adoration of Westland's Leader and his warlike principles. The following short speech, for example, she makes when alone on stage:

Martha [kneeling before the Leader's portrait]. My hero! My Leader! You will fight them, won't you? Say you will! Say you will! [Kneels for a moment, then rises, salutes and exit] (149)

The remaining characters also, but in generally more subdued tones, follow Martha's lead in finding in war an outlet for suppressed psycho-



sexual frustrations. As the conflict approaches, their enthusiasm mounts to an almost orgasmic intensity: troops marching by (on each side), for example, evoke the following exchange:

Dr. Thorvald. It's the spirit of Pericles! The poets have not sung in vain!

Mrs. Vrodny. I wish I were a man!

Martha. Out of the pit! Out of the mire and clay!

Oswald. Perhaps I ought to do something!

. . . . .

Col. Hussek. This makes me feel a boy again!

Dr. Thorvald. Some people have asked the meaning of history. They have their answer!

Mrs. Vrodny. They looked like princes!

Martha. The righteous shall inherit the earth!

Oswald. I shall drink less and less!

Mrs. Thorvald. My headache's quite gone!

Mrs. Vrodny. We shall be very famous indeed!

Mrs. Thorvald. We shall never die!

Col. Hussek. I have never lost a battle!

Dr. Thorvald. Everything's perfectly clear, now!

Oswald. After this, we shall all be much richer!

Col. Hussek. We are doing splendidly!

Martha. God is very glad! (147)

And similarly, after simultaneous climactic inflammatory radio speeches by Westland's Leader and Ostnia's king, the reaction is a satiety in which sexual emotion is clearly involved:

Col. Hussek [standing up in his chair, in great excitement]. God save the King! God save the King!

[He collapses.]

Mrs. Vrodny. Father! [She runs to him.] Quick, Oswald, the brandy!

Mrs. Thorvald. Dear me, I feel quite exhausted! (148)

The closing theme of On the Frontier, finally, as I indicated earlier, differs from Paid on Both Sides in accepting a somewhat nebulous conception of "love" as a liberating force through which frontiers and wars are destined eventually to be overcome. Eric and Anna are insignificant as characters, but it is through them that the love theme is brought to the fore. Here again, expressionist technique is used. The lines of the love theme are spoken in verse (verse as pedestrian, incidentally, as any







in Auden), and their encounters are projected as a kind of vague dream process. The implication here, of course, is that in the chaotic and distorted world of the present love is only possible in dreams; which in turn is a part of the overriding theme of man's real self--his potential self--residing in the unconscious:

Anna.           Where are we?  
 Eric.           In the place that I have found for us,  
                   The place that I have hoped for since I was  
                   born,  
                   Born, as we all are, into a world full of fear,  
                   Where the faces are not the faces of the happy,  
                   Where the disappointed hate the young  
                   And the disinherited weep in vain.  
                   . . . . .  
                   Ever since I was born I have been looking,  
                   Looking for a place where I could really  
                   be myself,  
                   For a person who would see me as I really am.  
                   And I have found them both, found them now,  
                   found them here.  
                   This is the good place. (149-150)

The "good place," thus, is the place of love, the true heart of life, and it is also, as the final scene of the play makes clear (Eric and Anna are both dying--casualties of, and sacrifices to, the madness and lust of war) a Utopian socialist state of the indefinite future, where all is good and hatred has been supplanted by love and peace:

Anna.           In sorrow and death  
                   We tasted love.  
 Eric.           But in the lucky guarded future  
                   Others like us shall meet, the frontier gone,  
                   And find the real world happy.  
                   . . . . .  
 Anna.           Europe lies in the dark  
                   City and flood and tree;  
                   Thousands have worked and work  
                   To master necessity.  
 Eric.           To build the city where  
                   The will of love is done  
                   And brought to its full flower  
                   The dignity of man. (190-191)



As I think my quotations here make clear, while there is definitely some progress toward a positive philosophy of life in Auden's writings since Paid on Both Sides, it has not yet at the time of On the Frontier reached anything very definite, conclusive, or detailed, as far as its intellectual definition is concerned. Auden does go on, however, to a more precise, indeed finally a quite orthodox religious philosophy in his later writings, and the period of On the Frontier catches this conversion in a transitional stage. Love, here, in any case, is clearly not yet a religious sentiment, but more one of a merely romantic longing (with no disparagement of its sincerity intended). Auden's present position as one of the foremost Kierkegaardian apologists writing in English may even be vaguely anticipated in such ideas in On the Frontier as the finding of love in "sorrow and death" but this is probably about as far as such an interpretation can legitimately be carried.

I think, then, that I can safely say at this point that there are few questions of importance remaining relative to Auden's plays themselves that need discussion. A brief summing-up of the achievement, however, as well as a speculation or two about why Auden left the medium of stage drama after On the Frontier to return to total commitment to poetry is perhaps worth making.





## CONCLUSION

The Dog Beneath the Skin turns out, almost inadvertently, to be the high point of Auden's dramatic achievement, yet there is the evidence of his two other (more ambitious) plays to demonstrate his efforts after Dog to advance his dramatic art. That this purpose is not achieved in the succeeding plays, as I think the preceding discussion has made clear, is a fact that is perhaps worth taking a moment to explain. The plays themselves offer ample materials for such an explanation. In comparing The Dog Beneath the Skin to The Ascent of F6 in the previous chapter, I stated at one point that Dog, in contrast to Ascent, is a play "without pretensions." This phrase captures, I think, the essence of what distinguishes the achievement of Dog from the other two major plays. It means, in other words, that in this play Auden is being himself, and it is clear that he does his best by being so. Though there are elements from other writers and other genres present, still the fusion of form, content, and style in The Dog Beneath the Skin is unique; this play alone, it might be said, is pure Auden and Isherwood. And they are quite delightfully unique. If we look then at The Ascent of F6, though it fails for other reasons, this play too partakes of this same uniqueness, and it is an interesting play to precisely the extent that it does so. To the extent that it is derivative (that is, conventional), it is less enduring and less successful. And following the same line into On the Frontier, the play that is manifestly the most conventional and derivative of the three is the play that I think my discussion has shown to be



clearly the least important. Stylistically much closer to Auden's mentor Brecht than either of the other plays, it fails because there is no corresponding Brecht inspiration for the creation of vital and vivid characters and idiom. These conventional aspects of drama, thus, just are not Auden's forte.

There is another important general feature of these plays that should be taken up here as well; this also the preceding chapter's discussion has made clear. This is the fact that the fundamental underlying vision of Auden's plays is ultimately focussed not politically, but psychologically. The plays that are unique, and that in Auden's judgment are the most important (important, that is, in terms of his continuous poetic development--being those from which he has taken the most excerpts for his collected works), Paid on Both Sides and The Dog Beneath the Skin, are manifestly the least political in their basic themes. And conversely, the most political of the plays, The Dance of Death and On the Frontier, demonstrate the same point, in Auden's subsequent total consignment of their poetry to limbo: nothing from either play appears in his collected works.

And this point, then, brings me to the consideration of why, after On the Frontier, Auden abandoned the field of drama.<sup>1</sup> On this question too the plays themselves supply several probable answers. If we return first of all to the question of politics in the plays, I have tried to stress throughout this thesis that to a very great extent Auden's impetus for writing drama in the first place stems largely from the direct example of his contemporary and friend Bertolt Brecht. He imitates Brecht in his style of theatre, in the political theme, and, (theoretically at least)





he writes for the same reasons as Brecht: to arouse, stimulate, entertain, and above all to educate the theatre-going public. It has already been demonstrated, however, that the socialist theme--which for Brecht is the foundation of his whole aesthetic creed--is not fundamentally compatible with the real aesthetic of Auden. Auden is interested in man clinically, as a specimen, not socially. Explicit avowal of this fact, of course, has not come yet, but it does come, in effect, after the move to America in 1939 (itself a symbolic act of withdrawal from the whole area of European politics), at which point socialist politics are forever dropped by Auden as a poetic subject. And this change is clearly latent in the plays; it is easy, therefore, for Auden to stop writing dramas around this time, for the motives for writing drama clearly no longer apply.

But there is more to the matter than this. Auden's whole technique in these plays contains elements, basic elements, that go against the very idea of the drama he is trying to write; that is to say, against the Brechtian style. Subtlety, for example, in his themes as in his style is an absolute fundamental of Auden's poetic method. If nothing else has become clear from a study of these plays, one thing at least is apparent: that in the main their real themes are both non-political and indirect. This could perhaps be clarified. A theme worked around Freudian psychology is the central and common theme of all the plays. It could be summed up in a few words by saying that Auden is primarily concerned with demonstrating man's failure to see himself clearly and to understand his own real nature in the Freudian sense. But the important point about this theme is that in no play is it presented directly. The Ascent of F6 is an exception, of course, but even here, when the authors



try to express the psychological theme directly, as a part of the drama, they have a great deal of trouble in putting it across. In the other plays it is not direct. To a great extent in each case (especially in Paid and Dog) we must depend on the choruses to get at the real meaning of the play.

If we take, for example, The Dog Beneath the Skin as the best of the plays and ask what the best of Dog is, we get the answer given in my discussion: the metaphor on which it is based; Francis' reversal of man's usual role, by putting his animal side out. But is this central theme really a part of the immediate theatre audience's experience? I should be inclined to say that it probably is not. The brilliant slapstick humour in the antics of Francis and Alan, yes, this can be appreciated immediately, but its accompanying serious theme is much less casually discernible. The between-scenes choruses, as I have shown, are basic to it (these, of course, are not drama at all, but poetry, and to a great extent quite separate in both mood and style from the rest of the play), and the significance of these is by no means so directly assimilable as the slapstick. On the contrary indeed, they require a couple of readings and a solid measure of thought to be fully comprehended. Auden himself, in fact, in one of Dog's choruses, precisely pinpoints the difficulty of successfully rendering his Freudian theme in dramatic terms:

Writer, be glib: please them with scenes of  
theatrical bliss and horror,  
Whose own slight gestures tell their doom with  
a subtlety quite foreign to the stage. (118)

It is a built-in difficulty, as it were, and one that not only never is, but perhaps can hardly be, completely overcome. Paid on Both Sides, the





first of Auden's plays, is clearly the most obtrusive example of the effort that must be made to understand Auden and his themes, but even though the later works do make concessions--great concessions--to dramatic necessity, the issues of an Auden play still never arrive, by the nature of the material itself, at anything resembling the clarity and directness of Brecht. Perhaps it finally took the almost complete failure of an essentially conventional drama, On the Frontier, to show Auden that his creative strength was not stage drama.



## FOOTNOTES

### Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>In his essay on modern art, The Dehumanization of Art. See Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on the Novel, trans. Helene Weyle, 103 pages.

<sup>2</sup>Maeterlinck, "Preface to Volume I of Theatre (Brussels Edition, 1907)," quoted here from Clark, European Theories of the Drama, 415.

<sup>3</sup>Clark, 415.

<sup>4</sup>Maeterlinck, "Program essay for 1890 production of The Blind," quoted here from Block and Shedd, Masters of the Modern Drama, 158.

<sup>5</sup>Strindberg, "Preface to A Dream Play," in Six Plays of Strindberg, 193.

<sup>6</sup>Kenworthy, Georg Kaiser, 25.

<sup>7</sup>Toller, "The Author to the Producer, October, 1926," prefaced to Masses and Man, in Seven Plays by Ernst Toller, 112.

<sup>8</sup>The works of Kokoschka are not available in translation and have not been read by the writer. This estimate is based on that given by Isaac Goldberg in The Drama of Transition, 313-318.

<sup>9</sup>Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, 251.

<sup>10</sup>Brecht, "Notes to the Threepenny Opera," in Plays, Vol. I, 179-180.

<sup>11</sup>Willet, The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht, 103.

### Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Auden, "Paid on Both Sides," in Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944, 199.

<sup>2</sup>The Lane influence is discussed fully in Chapter I, "Fantasy and Diagnosis," of Spears' The Poetry of W. H. Auden.





<sup>3</sup>See Spears, Chapter I, and Spender, The Destructive Element, Chapter XV.

<sup>4</sup>Viz. the following excerpt from a typical poem of this period, "Which Side am I Supposed to Be on," in Collected Shorter Poems, 148.

Boy, the quarrel was before your time, the aggressor  
 No one you know.  
 Your childish moments of awareness were all of our  
 world,  
 At five you sprang, already a tiger in the garden,  
 At night your mother taught you to pray for our Daddy,  
 Far away fighting.

<sup>5</sup>See Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 233-234.

<sup>6</sup>This may be a harsh judgment but there is no question that such of Freud's terms and ideas as Auden does use are frequently employed in a highly distorted form from the master's original. In Letters from Iceland, for example, the statement appears (233) that Englishmen "All suffer from an Oedipus fixation!"

<sup>7</sup>Symons, The Thirties, 79.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted from Symons, 79-80.

<sup>9</sup>This paragraph follows Symons' paraphrase, 80.

<sup>10</sup>Auden, The Dance of Death, 7.

<sup>11</sup>Symons, 79.

<sup>12</sup>Freud has recorded his reservations on this question in his Civilization and its Discontents. Part of his conclusion (90):

I would not say that an attempt of this kind to carry psychoanalysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. But we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Verschoyle, "The Theatre," Spectator, Feb. 7, 1936, 211.

<sup>2</sup>Auden, Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944, 32.

<sup>3</sup>Auden and Isherwood, The Dog Beneath the Skin, 17.



<sup>4</sup>The meaning of Destructive Desmond is a point of some dispute among Auden's critics. To Hoggart, Desmond is "the new barbarian, . . . furious at the discriminating, insistent that democracy means, not merely freedom to be a brute, but to admit no other standard." (77) To Spears, on the other hand, his performance of destroying a Rembrandt "and thereby gratifying the resentment and lack of taste of his audience," is a part of the play's social theme, "showing the influence of capitalism in debasing popular taste." (99) While something of these reasons may obtain, a further and probably more important element than either in the opinion of this writer, is the obvious affinity of Desmond's actions with the theories of a popular artistic cult of the day--"Dada," the very foundation of which movement was a calculated childish dedication to destruction (though not so literal as Desmond's) of all cultural rules of the past. See Brustein's The Theatre of Revolt for an interesting discussion of Dada in terms of one of its most important theoreticians, Andre Artaud. Also, Dada; Monograph of a Movement, gives further insights into the movement as a whole.

<sup>5</sup>Some of Piscator's techniques for these productions are discussed, among other places, in Chandler, Modern Continental Playwrights, 341 ff.

<sup>6</sup>Auden and Isherwood, The Ascent of F6, in The Ascent of F6 and On the Frontier, 13-14.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Lewars, in his The Quest Motif in Auden's Poems and Plays, finds this monastery scene philosophically the key episode in the play. The central preoccupation of this scene is on the human will and its significance. Lewars finds in this preoccupation evidence that Auden is already moving into a Kierkegaardian religious position in his personal philosophy. Ransom's final prayer, thus, is seen to be profound in its import:

Save us, save us from the destructive element of our will, for all we do is evil.

In Kierkegaardian terms, this is essentially the condition of man and the world, where each exercise of will or independence is a measure of man's distance from God.

<sup>8</sup>Brecht's Terror and Misery of the Third Reich and Toller's Pastor Hall.

#### Notes to Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>A radio monodrama by Auden was written and performed in 1940. This has not been published by Auden although a few lyrics have survived in the collected works. Significantly, the subject of this radio drama is completely remote from European politics.







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